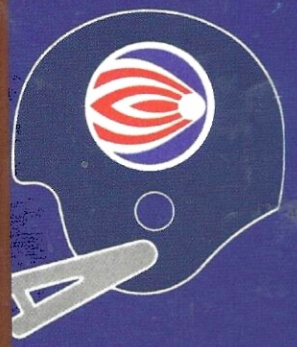
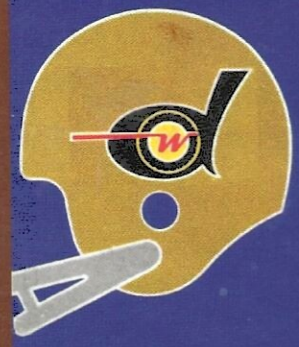




WIFFLE

The Wild, Zany and Sometimes Hilariously True Story of the World Football League

Mark Speck

1975

(LAST WFL SEASON)

WIFFLE

The Wild, Zany and Sometimes Hilariously True Story of the World Football League

Mark Speck

SJP
St. Johann Press
Haworth, New Jersey

ST. JOHANN PRESS

Published in the United States of America
by St. Johann Press
P.O. Box 241
Haworth, NJ 07641
www.stjohannpress.com

Copyright © 2015 Mark Speck

All Rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39/48-1992

Cover design by G&H SOHO, Inc.; Elmwood Park, NJ
Interior design and composition by Susan Ramundo
(susan@srdesktopservices.com)

ISBN 978-1-937943-24-0

Manufactured in the United States of America

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the following people for their kind, generous, and very much appreciated help with this book:

To my wife, Elise Speck, for her continued love, support and understanding.

To Dave Biesel at St. Johann Press, for having the strength and courage to believe in another project of mine.

To Tod Maher, who is still in the opinion of the author the dean of WFL researchers, for his continued support and assistance and his generous contribution of quite a bit of the research materials used to help put this book together.

To Aaron Johnson, for graciously allowing the author to use information from his fine website, www .wflnation.com.

To former WFL players Bob Cooper, Younis Zubchevich, Chuck Beatty, Boice Best, Don Ratliff, Bob Rush, Lenny Izzo, and Mike McBath, for generously sharing some of their WFL experiences.

To the staff at the Oakland County, Michigan, Circuit Court for their assistance with the results of a lawsuit brought against the Detroit Wheels.

To Richie Franklin, Jim Cusano, Greg Allred and Chuck Gardner, who generously gave the author permission to use an amazing amount of invaluable information from their great website on the WFL at http://worldfotballleague.org/. Another big "thank you" to them for continuing to keep the memories of the WFL alive through their fine and very informative website.

Introduction

The 1970s was a unique, fascinating, depressing and exciting decade all at the same time. Kent State. Vietnam. All in the Family. Nixon. Agnew. The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Watergate. Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Dean. M*A*S*H. Patty Hearst. Oil embargoes. Recession. Hank Aaron breaking Babe Ruth's home run record and encountering not only cheers but death threats and racist hate mail, as well. Long lines at the gas pumps. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. A president—Gerry Ford—who got shot at not once but two separate times, and who spent the rest of his time tripping over everything in sight. Billy Carter. Saturday Night Live. It was a turbulent decade that saw history-making events, fads and fashions come and go.

A lot of things didn't survive those turbulent 70s. Nixon. Bell bottoms. Leisure suits. Jimmy Hoffa. Lava lamps. Mood rings. Nehru jackets. Disco. Manned flights to the moon.

And the World Football League. Like the decade itself, the WFL was at once unique, fascinating, depressing and exciting. It was a slick, mod, hip alternative to an established entity, the National Football League. It featured the Dickerrod, King Corcoran, bouncing checks, yellow footballs, court orders, magenta and orange uniforms, color-coded pants, Papergate, and singular team nicknames like the Fire, the Bell, the Steamer and the Thunder.

In the end, it turned out to be only a blip on the radar of pro football history. But while it existed, it was one of the wildest, zaniest yet hilariously true stories in the history of sports. It never ceased to amaze and entertain, and it still does to this day. It was perhaps summed up best by Alex Hawkins, color commentator for the WFL's Game of the Week broadcasts on TVS. "The whole thing was so bizarre," the Hawk said, "that you just had to love it."

So settle in and enjoy a 50-yard-line ticket to a real-life Theater of the Absurd.

Part Two

CHAPTER 19

"The Guy That Had That WFL Thing"

Chris Hemmeter

"I don't mind losing money, but when you lose it looking like a fool, well, that's not my idea of a good time."

—CHRIS HEMMETER

Chris Hemmeter will always be remembered for the idea that carried his name, The Hemmeter Plan, his design to try to save the Wiffle from itself—and its owners—in 1975. This is unfortunate, as he was also regarded as one of Hawaii's leading real estate developers and businessmen, one of those people the press liked to call a real "mover-and-shaker."

Christopher Hemmeter was born in 1939 in Washington, D.C. and grew up in Los Altos in the San Francisco Bay area. After attending Cornell University and graduating first in his class in 1962 he moved to Hawaii with $600 in his pocket. He found modest hotel work, but as late as 1965 he, his wife Karen and their three children were sharing a two-room gardener's shack. For as long as anyone in Hawaii could remember, however, Hemmeter was a man on the rise. He soon got a job as a management trainee at the Sheraton Royal Hawaiian, and his career started to take off.

He was creating quite a stir in the restaurant business, and by 1967, when he was just 28 years old, he had made his first million. Although he was a success as a restaurateur, hotelman, retailer and a developer, he laughed at such descriptions.

"People call me a restaurateur," he said, "when I can't cook eggs. I can't even read a French menu. I was just providing basic business principles to the restaurant business. That's all I've done with all my businesses."

Hemmeter's development career continued to flourish in the latter part of the 1960s when he partnered with Henry Shigekane and Diane Plotts to develop resorts in Hawaii. He was involved in helping develop the Westin Kauai, Hyatt Waikoloa and the Westin Maui.

By 1974, Hemmeter was one of the aforementioned movers-and-shakers in Hawaii, and was approached by Danny Rogers about investing in the WFL. "He was one of the original promoters," Hemmeter recalled, "and Gary (Davidson) let us know that we could acquire the franchise for a relatively modest sum of money." The idea that he could obtain a franchise so easily set off warning bells in Hemmeter's mind.

"Getting the franchise was certainly not a problem," Hemmeter remembered, "and I think that was the main problem of the World Football League. There wasn't a great deal of discipline regarding the handling and administration of the franchises and their purchase." He was granted a franchise in the fledgling league, and his team, known as The Hawaiians, was unlike most of the other Wiffle teams, as it actually represented a serious attempt at a viable professional football organization. Hemmeter was one of the few owners who were reasonably well financed.

"We were excited and the community was very supportive of the Hawaii franchise," Hemmeter said in an interview with a WFL website. "The local government, politicians, the governor, the private businessmen in Hawaii all showed support for our venture."

Unfortunately, the fans didn't support the venture, and The Hawaiians averaged only about 15,000 fans a game, one of the lowest in the league. Add that to the expense of flying from Honolulu to the mainland and maintaining a team on extended road trips, and the team wound up losing a ton of money.

But after the disaster that was the 1974 season, Hemmeter was determined to make good.

"I feel like such a fool," he said of the '74 disaster. "That's why I'm doing all this, to show people that it can be done. I don't mind losing money, but when you lose it looking like a fool, well, that's not my idea of a good time."

Hemmeter had other things to motivate him. In 1974, he had gotten a lot of friends and associates to invest in The Hawaiians with him. "I want a reputation that says, if you invest with me I'll do everything possible to protect that investment," he said. "Otherwise, people will say, 'sure he's had a lot of successes, but he was also the guy that had that WFL thing."

He admitted that getting involved with the Wiffle in the first place was a mistake. His participation was really something of a civic gesture. Honolulu was building a brand-new, 50,000-seat stadium, but no one came forward to help him bankroll The Hawaiians.

"The bigger the challenge the happier I am," he said. "I started the biggest project in the history of Hawaii, and this WFL thing was the biggest sports disaster in history."

After the financially disastrous 1974 season, Hemmeter was approached by several owners and asked to replace league founder Gary L. Davidson as the league's commissioner. The owners knew that in essence Hemmeter was an idea man, one who could come up with the solution that would make a project pay off. Now they were hoping that Hemmeter could come up with a solution to make the Wiffle pay off. "When the WFL went into bankruptcy in 1974, we were all trying to figure out what we were going to do," Hemmeter recalled. "Let the league fold, reorganize, or steal quietly away. We decided that we would take a business-like approach to professional sports."

He agreed to become league president, and then, after claiming he came up with the idea in the shower, proposed the Hemmeter Plan to restructure the league to the Wiffle owners. "We were trying to . . . eliminate the runaway payrolls of the 1974 WFL and have a profitable league based on an attendance of 14,000," Hemmeter remembered. "We thought if we could achieve that, then we would be able to move forward and create a sound base to build on."

The plan was designed to restore the league's financial health by restructuring players' salaries to a $500 per game minimum with a profit sharing arrangement with the teams, and a fresh cash infusion from the team owners.

"The only thing that's going to cure the World Football League is dollars," said Hemmeter. "Equity dollars, not debt dollars. We can't solve our problems by borrowing. Our first step is to provide the proper environment for investment. Right now the credibility of the league stinks, but under this plan we have a credible business deal."

Because there were only three stable franchises in the league, Hemmeter would merely ask interested owners to put money in escrow for their purchases until there were enough solid investors to reestablish the league.

Interestingly enough, Hemmeter, who owned 13 companies and expected to open his $150-million Hemmeter Center in Honolulu the following year, had designed one of the more charismatic offices in sports for his Wiffle headquarters. It had suede walls.

In the early part of 1975, Hemmeter virtually lived on airplanes, traveling about 15,000 miles a week. Four times he flew from Honolulu or the Pacific Coast to Jacksonville for meetings that were canceled when he arrived. He was forced to do most of his sleeping in the air. When planning the league's revival started to grow hectic, he slept through an emergency landing in Denver.

His biggest problem was establishing credibility for a league that virtually had none, an embarrassing process for Hemmeter who was remarkably open and aboveboard in his dealings. When courses of action were suggested that didn't appear to him "fair and proper," he would most likely respond, "That would make us seem like a bunch of WFL guys." Hemmeter was under tremendous pressure to make the league successful. "We were trying to right a wrong," Hemmeter recalled. "We were trying to get players paid who hadn't been paid in 1974. We had to negotiate settlements on stadium rents and airline transportation that hadn't been paid. It was a very difficult problems for us."

Hemmeter's position as chairman of the executive committee of the Bank of Honolulu gained him access to responsible financial figures in most of the cities he visited. Seven of the 11 ownership groups that met in New York had a bank director among their members. Only a handful of 1974's owners remained: John Bassett in Memphis; John Bosacco in Philadelphia; several investors in The Hawaiians; and Sam Battistone, a part owner of the 1974 Hawaiians who purchased a substantial portion of the Southern California franchise.

The Hemmeter Plan that generated so much enthusiasm was designed to eliminate the ways of the old Wiffle—all the empty promises, bankruptcy, fraud, Internal Revenue Service liens. It was also designed to transform the professional sports industry. Southern California head coach Tom Fears called it "revolutionary."

The basic idea was to make the team's expenses relate to the team's revenues. Specifically, 42% of a team's gate receipts and TV-radio income would go to the players and coaches. Stadium rentals would be roughly 10% of the gate. League assessments would be 10% of income from the gate, TV-radio and commercial properties, which would include items such as pennants, programs and bobble-head dolls.

That added up to roughly two-thirds of a team's income. The remaining portion—37% of the gate and larger percentages of the other income sources (the formula was very complex, as its details took up no less than 108 typewritten pages)—would go into an "Operating Expense and Profit Account" that would cover fixed costs such as office salaries and rent, travel expenses, equipment, publicity expenses, printing and mailing costs and telephone, telegraph and what-not. Hemmeter had put a ceiling of $650,000 on those costs. This may have made the WFL look like a "bargain basement" outfit, but after the 1974 disaster, Wiffle members had developed a remarkable appreciation for the wisdom of economizing. Teams would have to allocate a minimum of 31% of gross revenues to cover these fixed expenses.

Hemmeter scheduled an organizational meeting for April. For this get-together, each owner was supposed to come up with somewhere between $600,000 and $1.2 million, depending on the club's liabilities. And unlike 1974, this had to be real money, not promises. Of this total, a flat sum of $75,000 would go directly to the league to help pay its debts, and another chunk was for a 15% down payment on unpaid 1974 player salaries. The remainder, which had to amount to at least $525,000, would be the club's working capital. This money had to be deposited in an account which would then be subject to league inspection.

Under this arrangement, Hemmeter said, if the league drew only half the attendance it had in 1974 (at an average of $7 a ticket), it would take at least three seasons to exhaust its basic working capital, Hemmeter said. The key factor in all this was tying expenses to revenue. If the WFL averaged 17,000 fans per game, Hemmeter said it could break even in 1975. If it averaged 25,000, each team could make a $190,000 profit.

The biggest problem the WFL faced in '75 was that it didn't average anywhere near 17,000 fans a game, let alone 25,000. The overall apathy toward the league and its teams resulted in some attendance figures that ranged from disappointing to downright embarrassing.

A major stumbling block the league faced was whether enough players would be willing to play for a percentage of gross income. "Each player," Hemmeter stressed, "would be, in essence, a private contractor." Since WFL squads would number about 34 players (as compared to 47 for the NFL), the players would average about 1% each of the payroll pool after the coaching staff had been paid. In Birmingham in 1974, for example, 1% would have equaled about $25,000. But in, say, Hawaii, 1% would have amounted to only about $11,000. To help balance such inequities, the WFL would reintroduce gate sharing, which it had dropped halfway through the '74 season in a fit of hometown greed. Instead of nothing, visitors would take 40% of the gate in 1975, just like the NFL.

To guarantee that all teams were complying with these rules, their books would be reviewed by a league comptroller every two weeks. The WFL hired a national accounting firm named Haskins and Sells, which would send a representative to each team to keep a tight check on the books, and to ensure that the Hemmeter Plan was being followed right down to the last detail.

"I think this is the league of the future," Hemmeter said, "I don't delude myself into thinking my plan is the savior of sports as an industry, but it can be the savior of sports as a financial entity, and there's a keen distinction. This plan will allow the WFL to endure as a financial entity, and let it exploit itself on the field where it belongs."

"The plan is mathematically infallible," he declared.

Adding Joe Namath to a Larry Csonka would have certainly enhanced the Wiffle's chances of getting a decent TV contract, but what the WFL had to demonstrate first was stability, which Hemmeter went to great lengths to establish. He said such things as transportation and hotel costs would have to be prepaid before the season. Gate padding—the "papering of the house" practice that had essentially killed any credibility the Wiffle had in '74—would be eliminated. To eliminate fast-buck speculators, no owner could sell his franchise during the first three years of the plan without first offering it to the league for $100,000.

According to those who knew him, the plan's real attraction was Hemmeter himself. Most of the investors were gambling on him, and he agreed to remain as president of the league for three years. "We're going to have to take a lot of life insurance out on that fellow," said one investor.

Those who knew Hemmeter best, however, said that once the plan was in operation and the league

apparently secure, he would grow bored and would begin to look for a new project. "He has to be creating all the time," said his business associate, Diane Plotts.

Ultimately, Hemmeter's efforts were undone when the Chicago team failed to sign Joe Namath. This led to the Wiffle's 1974 television partner, TVS, to back out. The lack of a national television contract, combined with the league's already damaged reputation, plus dreadful attendance figures, resulted in the league folding in the middle of the 1975 season.

"We were like little kids trying to play a big kids' game," Hemmeter lamented years later. "There was a certain air of inexperience in the front office, with our general managers . . . there wasn't a sense of cohesiveness or collective strength. We just didn't have the collective strength. The owners who had the financial reserves resented the owners who did not."

Looking back on the situation through the passage of time, Hemmeter said, "In retrospect, the World Football League shouldn't have continued in 1975 unless we had a five-year plan to achieve success."

As did many others, Hemmeter felt that the NFL had definitely worked with the media to discredit the WFL. "They controlled the media in professional sports," Hemmeter recalled. "They had a monopoly, and they were so strong and so powerful and had so much talent in the promotional arena that it was virtually impossible to deal with the media. The NFL would 'wine and dine' the media and anytime someone would be helpful to us the NFL would come over and say, 'Fellas, you can choose your own medicine, but unless you back away from the World Football League you can be assured the National Football League will never consider coming into your community or even taking a look at you.'"

At the same time, however, the architect of the Hemmeter Plan, added, "That wasn't the cause of the demise of the World Football League. The demise of the World Football League took place in 1973 when Gary Davidson lined up owners who didn't have the financial reserves to make the league a success." So, despite the best efforts of Chris Hemmeter to fix what was undoubtedly an unfixable situation, to bring some sense to senseless circumstances, the WFL couldn't survive its second season, folding a little over halfway through the '75 campaign, putting a whole lot of people out of work.

When Hemmeter was informed that NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle had forbidden his league owners to sign any players from the WFL, Hemmeter said the decision was definitely "pilo." This was an old Hawaiian word which meant a foul, swampy odor.

CHAPTER 20

"We're Responsible People"

The Wiffle, 1975

"This plan is mathematically infallible."
—WFL President CHRIS HEMMETER

Though many had figured the WFL was better off dead and buried after its financially disastrous and sometimes ludicrous '74 season, the league stated it was ready to return for the 1975 season with a new leader, President Chris Hemmeter, the former co-owner of the 1974 Hawaiians franchise, and a new attitude. Hemmeter had developed a plan to restore some sort of financial sanity to the league by paying players and coaches based on a percentage of revenues. Gone, Hemmeter promised, were the wild and wooly days of Gary Davidson, legal hassles, bouncing checks, huge signing bonuses, bad decisions and poor management.

John Bassett, chairman of the executive committee, said that Hemmeter, because of his reputation as a solid businessman, would be able to give the WFL "credibility in the financial community . . . which we haven't had up to now," and let people know that "we're responsible people."

Hemmeter, a clean-cut, 36-year-old, who looked like he just walked out of a Rotary Club meeting, sincerely believed that the WFL could become successful if he could install "prudent business practices" and "a sound financial control concept."

"When the WFL went into bankruptcy in 1974, we were all trying to figure out what we were going to do," said Hemmeter, "let the league fold, reorganize or steal quietly away. We decided that we would take a business-like approach to professional sports and apply certain principles to minimize our fixed costs and maximize our variable costs as a percentage of total revenues. We thought, with this plan, we could go to bankruptcy court and buy back the player contracts and such and move forward. That was the plan that was ultimately called the 'Hemmeter Plan.' We were trying to create an environment of 80% fixed costs and eliminate the runaway payrolls of the 1974 WFL and have a profitable league based on an attendance of 14,000 a game. We thought if we could achieve that, then we would be able to move forward and create a sound base to build on."

"The first aspect of the Hemmeter Plan was getting our payroll under control and encouraging the players to sign for a percentage of revenues as opposed to a fixed dollar amount, so that each player would be, in essence, a private contractor," Hemmeter explained, "A 1% running back may run behind a line of .75% linemen, and everyone would have an interest in the success of the team. That was the basic concept behind the plan."

If all of this sounded incredibly boring, it's only because it was. The 1974 version of the Wiffle failed because of its wild and crazy spending and ideas. It was irresponsible but at least it was interesting. The '75 version was trying to show the world that it was responsible, but unlike the '74 edition, the "New WFL" was as interesting as a board of directors meeting.

At a league meeting in Philadelphia on March 12th, Hemmeter's plan to restructure the league was approved. Each team was required to place $1 to $2 million in escrow accounts to insure they would pay operational expenses for the entire season. Players would be signed to contracts that gave them 1% of their team's revenue. The league's debts from 1974 could also be paid.

On April 16th, 1975, at a press conference at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York, Hemmeter, joined by Larry Csonka, Paul Warfield, John Gilliam and other league luminaries, officially announced that the World Football League would return for another season. Hemmeter added that eleven cities appeared ready to go. Several of the old teams returned with new names and new ownership. The deceased Sharks of Jacksonville came back as the Express. The Birmingham Americans were replaced by the Vulcans, and the Chicago Fire became the Winds. The World Bowl runner-up, the Florida Blazers, had folded, and in a complicated deal, their franchise rights were relocated to San Antonio, Texas, as the San Antonio Wings. Only two teams, Memphis and Philadelphia, returned with the same ownership from the prior season. Hemmeter said that Portland, Oregon, could possibly join the league if they were able to firm up their financial status.

Hemmeter announced that the WFL would operate as a new corporation known as The New League, Inc. He stated that this new corporation was an entirely new entity and had no ties to the old corporation. However, since The New League, Inc. purchased the rights to use the WFL name and logo for $10,000, Hemmeter said it felt some moral obligation to the creditors the old organization owed. In the next twelve years, The New League, Inc. would pay roughly 1.5% of ticket sales and television revenue to those creditors under a court-administered agreement.

"I believe the creditors will accept it, otherwise they simply will get no money if the old league goes into bankruptcy," Hemmeter said.

An owner could still lure a player with a bonus, or pay him more than a straight percentage, but if he did that he had to escrow the money before the season began. Long-term contracts given in 1974 to such NFL stars as Larry Csonka, Calvin Hill and John Gilliam to persuade them to play in the WFL in 1975 would remain in effect.

"This plan is mathematically infallible," Hemmeter added.

Mathematically, at least, the "Hemmeter Plan" might have indeed been infallible.

But when combined with low attendance, rising costs, bad management, poor decisions, and wacky ideas, the Plan became very fallible indeed.

They served on a different field of battle

A few WFL players served in Vietnam and distinguished themselves on a whole different field of battle. Cornelius Johnson, Don Talbert, Glenn Ellison, and Howard Kindig all did hitches in the Armed Forces during the Vietnam Era. Bruce Bergey, older brother of Bengal and Eagle linebacker Bill Bergey, won a Bronze Star for Heroism as a U.S. Army Corporal. Jim Thorpe, teammate of Bergey in Portland, was a medic for 2 years in Vietnam. Lem Burnham of The Hawaiians did a 13-month hitch in Vietnam, an experience he said changed him forever. "Life is fragile," Burnham said.

The WFL gave up on the idea of mid-week football and in '75 would play on the weekends. The Wiffle again decided to play a 20-game schedule but this time with exhibition games. The first 10 games would be the "Summer Season" and the second ten weeks would be the "Fall Season." Division champions from each of the seasons would qualify for the playoffs to be held on the weekends of December 20th and 21st and 27th and 28th. The World Bowl was scheduled to be held on the weekend of January 4th, 1976.

The league was hoping to get a national TV contract. But the chances of that looked bleak, especially after the April league meeting.

Despite the losses they suffered in 1974, TVS and Eddie Einhorn were actually willing to stick it out for another season. That was until Hemmeter announced the Chicago Winds were going to try to sign Namath. Einhorn told Hemmeter that the league had effectively bet its whole credibility on Namath coming to Chicago, and none of TVS' affiliates would commit to broadcasting the 1975 season unless Namath signed with the Winds. When he didn't, the WFL was left without a national television contract.

"I went to the big meeting of all the owners at the Waldorf," said Einhorn, "Hemmeter had everyone there and they made the big announcement about how the new WFL was in existence. Then they said they were hoping to sign Joe Namath. As soon as it was over, I went up to Chris and I told him he had just buried himself. I said, 'Chris, you just did the worst thing you possibly could do. If you don't get Namath you're through. You've put all your credibility on your ability to sign Joe Namath.' I was right, of course. My clients all reacted the same way—they wouldn't buy time until they saw if Joe was signed. Now if the league had signed Namath—although, who knows, he might've got hurt in the first five minutes of play—that would have been the fluff needed to bring the thing back from the dead, at least for the start.

"So the people wouldn't buy it," Einhorn continued, "You can't promise them Joe Namath and then give them some bum. They blew the credibility factor when they blew Namath. After that happened we couldn't sell a thing. We just let it pass. In the final analysis, the league had mediocrity written all over it. It had $250- or $500-a-game players written all over it. I think the lack of a national television package definitely hurt their credibility, too. If a league's not good enough to have a national TV game of the week, a guy doesn't want to go. It's bush and he's not going to pay money to see it."

On May 17th, at a league meeting in Birmingham, the league announced it had decided not to use the much-maligned Dickerrod for the 1975 season. Also, it was announced that the gold Palomino football with orange stripes was going to be abandoned for a traditional color scheme.

With these changes, instead of an innovative, creative alternative to the NFL, the WFL was looking more and more like just a cheaper imitation of the NFL.

In June, figures for the debts accrued by the '74 Wiffle were released. They revealed the depth of the losses suffered by the teams in their first season.

The league had run up $20 million in debts, while their bank account registered assets of $10,000. According to papers filed in a California bankruptcy court, the WFL owed $6.3 million in salaries to 500 players; $559,763 to over 50 coaches; $117,071 to over 40 game officials; and $1.6 million to other creditors, such as airlines, equipment companies and hotels.

These figures did not include an estimated $7 million committed by the league for future player salaries, and debts owed by individual teams.

Richard Cohn, an attorney for the Birmingham Vulcans, said that even if the Wiffle survived for another 12 years, he doubted that it would earn enough to fully repay all the debts compiled by the '74 version of the WFL.

Clothes Make the Man . . . But Not the Offensive Tackle

The WFL came up with some interesting innovations during its short life, some of which are still in use today by the NFL. It made touchdowns worth seven points instead of six. The league dropped the extra point kick for an "action point." They moved the goal posts to the back of the end zone. The WFL kicked off from the 30-yard line instead of the 40. It returned missed field goals to the original line of scrimmage. But one innovation the WFL—and its players and fans—wish they would have left on the drawing board was the idea of "color-coded pants." That's right, color-coded pants. For the '75 exhibition season, the WFL decided that it would be a good idea to help fans identify each of the positions on the field. To accomplish this, they actually had the players wear pants that featured a color scheme that would designate a certain position on the field. For example, offensive linemen would wear purple pants, running backs would wear green ones, wide receivers orange, defensive linemen blue trousers, and so on. Sound weird? It was. And the idea was not met with approval by the players. In fact, the Memphis Grizzlies absolutely refused to wear theirs. "I've spent eleven years in professional football trying to build a serious image," said Paul Warfield as he checked out his orange trousers with the black vertical stripes, "I'm too far along in my career to begin playing Emmett Kelly." "I'd look like a lime tree," snarled Jim Kiick, "or some kind of fruit." "They came out and had those striped pants and everything else," laughed Vince Papale now, but he wasn't laughing then, "It looked like the guys at the Vatican, the Swiss Guard at the Vatican for crying out loud. We looked at them and said, 'Man, there is just no way they're going to have us wearing those pants,' and thank God they didn't!" The color-coded pants idea was the brainchild of William B. Finneran, who had come up with the idea of the action point in 1974. He described the pants plan as "color dynamics, the concept of implementing means whereby one's visual appreciation of dynamic movement is significantly increased." If anyone out there can decipher what that means, please contact the author through the publisher.

No matter what the Wiffle tried to do, the league still seemed to be snake-bit. Their original plan called for the preseason to open on July 5th and the regular season to begin on August 2nd. However, due to a stadium conflict, the regular season had to open a week earlier, with a single game on Saturday, July 26th. This meant that a single regular season game was played in the midst of the last weekend of preseason play.

"And the kick is good for three points . . . or is it two? . . . Maybe one?"

Another rule the WFL tried during the 1975 preseason that should have never gotten past the planning stages was the idea of making field goals of different lengths worth different amounts of points. The league honchos decided to try the idea that any field goals kicked from inside the 10-yard line would be worth 1 point, while field goals kicked from between the 10- and 30-yard lines would be worth two points. Any field goal kicked from outside the 30-yard line would be worth the traditional 3-points. This rule, like the author's first marriage, has to fall under the category of "It seemed like a good idea at the time." But it wasn't. The league front office soon realized that offensive teams would begin to take deliberate penalties to move the ball back so that the team could attempt a more valuable field goal. Defensive teams might "lie down" and let the opposition get closer to the goal line so that they could try a less valuable field goal. If they continued using the rule teams might soon make a travesty of the game (and the league office was doing a good enough job of that, thank you very much!). It was used during the preseason but quickly voted out of the rule book.

Despite Hemmeter's efforts, several teams soon ran into financial difficulties, in part due to alarmingly low attendance figures. Philadelphia and Portland couldn't draw crowds anywhere near 10,000, much less the 20,000 needed to survive under the Hemmeter Plan. Charlotte drew a little better but was not helped by having only four home games in the season's first 11 weeks. But the first crisis in the league in 1975 was in Chicago.

The Winds had floundered rudderless after failing to sign Namath. Unlike the Fire in 1974, who had at least drawn decent crowds, the Winds couldn't draw flies. In an exhibition game against Jacksonville, only 2,627 people sat in 55,701-seat Soldier Field. After two losses on the road to open the season, Chicago returned home to play Portland. Another sparse crowd of 3,470 folks was on hand. The Winds won the game, 25-18 in overtime, but averaging a little over 3,000 fans a game was not going to cut it. After two more losses made the Winds 1-and-4, two investors withdrew their money from the Winds account. When this happened the Winds were "no longer a physical part of the league structure," according to a league announcement.

"That brought them below minimum capitalization requirements," announced Hemmeter, "We agreed from Day One that kind of violation would not be tolerated. That was the kind of request that was granted last year. We are not going to proceed on speculation and look-sees and hope.

"From a business standpoint, it is certainly a more responsible act to shut down a potential problem than to allow the potential for future problems to exist," added Hemmeter, "We are not willing to gamble on the future of the league."

Mike Storen, Memphis executive vice president, said the decision to fold the Chicago franchise was "the most positive, businesslike decision the league has made in its two years of existence."

"I think this the most positive action the WFL has taken since we've been a member," echoed Portland general manager Bob Brodhead. "The franchise holders had not met the requirements of the Hemmeter Plan." Brodhead then waxed poetic by adding, "The league put out the fire before the wind blew it out of proportion."

Hemmeter said that all player contracts and other financial responsibilities would be fulfilled. He added that the WFL had deposited "about $125,000" in league funds to satisfy refund claims from the 1,600 season ticket holders and any other debts.

The Winds players were immediately dispersed to the other 10 teams by way of a draft. John Gilliam was chosen by Philadelphia but said he would return to the NFL Vikings instead.

"I consider myself a free agent," said Gilliam, "I allowed the WFL to assign me to Chicago, but my contract has been violated. We hope that Commissioner Rozelle will allow me to resume in the NFL." Although the NFL had a rule forbidding the signing of any WFL player, Gilliam did indeed wind up back in Minnesota, a ruling Hemmeter and the Philadelphia front office were not at all happy about.

Although many involved in the league thought that jettisoning the Chicago franchise was the wise and prudent thing to do, it didn't help the overall outlook of the Wiffle. Chicago was one of the biggest markets in the country, and failing there and having to abandon it was just one more negative thing that made the WFL look more and more like a minor league.

Quarterblacks

Besides Willie Wood being the first African-American head coach in pro football since the 1920s, the WFL also had a leg up on the NFL

in the area of black quarterbacks. In 1974 and 1975, the NFL had three black quarterbacks—James Harris of the Rams, J.J. Jones of the Jets and Joe Gilliam of the Steelers. The WFL, meanwhile, had 8 African-American signal callers—Eddie McAshan and Reggie Oliver of Jacksonville; David Mays and D.C. Nobles of Houston/Shreveport; Lonnie Stewart of Memphis; Jim Ousley of Portland; Matthew Reed of Birmingham; and Johnnie Walton of San Antonio. Houston was also ready to build its offense around former first round NFL pick Eldridge Dickey, but he did not show up at camp. Not only did these quarterbacks make their respective teams, they also started and in many cases starred for their clubs.

The rest of the league's teams bravely soldiered on, hoping for a miracle. But the public ignored the league. Attendance was abysmal. The franchises were finding it nearly impossible to market their fast sinking ship. Finally, on October 7th, reports surfaced that the league was considering asking four of its 10 teams to take a 40 percent pay cut.

"Philadelphia, Charlotte, Jacksonville and the San Antonio Wings have all been requested by the league to take a 40 percent cut in salaries," said Wings' defensive tackle Paul Vellano, "We just got offered the suggestion the other day; what we'll do is still up in the air. We'll try to stay in business for the rest of the season.

"If we don't accept the cut, we probably won't make it through the season. Possibly by the end of the season we'll be able to attract some potential investors—they'll be needed for us to survive.

"If some players take the cut and some don't, they'll always be able to find players to play for x amount of dollars. But some will leave and some will play. At Philadelphia last week, a couple of players refused to play and left.

"I'd say the attitude is favorable toward acceptance," Vellano said, "We want to see this league make it. If we don't accept it, we won't be in business any longer.

"The problem is that a little over half of the players are playing for the $250 minimum per game, plus $250 from concessions—and even there that isn't always coming in."

That same day, Hemmeter announced that the league would begin a national marketing program in an effort to boost its sagging attendance figures.

"We're going to try something new," Hemmeter told the press, "Up until this point the ultimate responsibility for attendance has been at the franchise level. The league will now act as a coordinator."

Hemmeter met on the 6th with John Bassett and John Bosacco to talk about "the most challenging question in our minds," referring to attendance, or the lack thereof. Hemmeter said the Southern California—Memphis game on the 5th was a prime example of what he was talking about.

"What more do you have to do to draw more people in a game?" said Hemmeter. "Two of the league's best teams, the summer championship at stake, some of the most heralded players in pro football, a nice Sunday afternoon, everything going for you—and just 18,129 in the stands."

Like it or not, the Wiffle was still battling the negative feelings left over from 1974. The public just wasn't buying what the WFL had to offer. The "Papergate" scandal, the fact that two teams folded and two others were forced to move, all the talk of missed paychecks and financial hardships still hung over the Wiffle like a dark, threatening storm cloud. They were never able to get out from under it, either.

"Every time I go into a city, there is a report that the WFL team in that city is going bankrupt," Hemmeter said at the time. "Our league has 10 teams, they are playing their games on schedule and we will finish the season. It seems that the media in WFL cities support us, but the media in 27 other cities wants us to go out of business."

Hemmeter was obviously talking about the NFL cities, where any bit of bad news generated by the WFL was reported and emphasized. Because of the folding of the Chicago franchise, the talk of pay cuts for the players, and the financial difficulties faced by several teams, many saw the 1975 WFL as being right on schedule with the '74 edition.

During the weekend of October 11th and 12th, while NBC launched a new television show called *Saturday Night Live*, the WFL did horrible business again. Five NFL games that weekend outdrew the total attendance figure for all the WFL games combined! Like *SNL*, the WFL seemed to have their own "Not Ready for Primetime Players." Unfortunately, unlike those that starred on NBC's new hip show, the WFL's players would soon be out of a job.

On October 13th, Wiffle team owners were summoned to New York for an urgent meeting to discuss the future of the league, with the possibility of disbanding the league to be seriously discussed.

"We can go along like we are," said Hemmeter, "we can try to fund ourselves where we are weak, we can cut out our weaker markets, or we can shut down."

Hemmeter said the key decision was not 1975, but for 1976 and beyond. "If there isn't hope for '76, our interest in '75 will terminate. We are exploring all directions to save the league. We just don't want it to go down the drain," Hemmeter said.

Speculation centered on the fact that if the league voted to continue playing, it would be with only 8 teams and not 10. Rumors swirled that Portland and Philadelphia would be dropped "for the overall good of the rest of the league," according to a league official who refused to be named. Both clubs had experienced problems from the get-go in 1975.

Memphis owner John Bassett, fed up and disgusted with the problems of the Wiffle, flew from Memphis to New York after watching the Grizzlies lose to Birmingham. "I can't say what will happen," Bassett told the press, "Anything could happen. I'm going to sit back and listen to everybody. I don't have any grand designs."

When asked if the meeting could be termed "critical," Bassett responded, "You're damned right it's critical. I can tell you that I am damned tired of all these problems in our league."

The most critical problem in the league was the fact that no one was coming out to the games. The WFL's season attendance figures were absolutely embarrassing. Here were the numbers after the games of the week of October 12th.

Team	Total	Average
Birmingham	115,668	19,278
Charlotte	43,521	10,880
Hawaii	74,337	14,867
Jacksonville	77,906	12,984
Memphis	138,848	19,835
Philadelphia	14,818	3,705
Portland	39,263	7,853
San Antonio	77,409	11,058
Shreveport	96,488	16,081
Southern California	51,058	12,765
League	732,786	13,323

To put things in some kind of god-awful perspective, the NFL game that weekend in Detroit—which drew 74,812 people—managed to outdraw the *season attendance totals* of five of the Wiffle's teams. Want more? The games in the NFL that weekend drew a total of 679,336 fans, only 53,450 people—an average NFL crowd—less than the WFL had managed to draw during their entire season.

Want even more? Here is a comparison of the four weeks the NFL and WFL had gone head-to-head so far in '75.

	WFL Total Attendance	NFL Games
September 20th and 21st	72,672	Buffalo, 80,020 Miami, 78,744
September 27th and 28th	59,727	Cleveland, 68,064 Kansas City, 74,169 New England, 61,279
October 4th and 5th	67,220	Buffalo, 80,020 Cleveland, 73,595 Detroit, 79,784
October 11th and 12th	52,220	New York, 56,511 Detroit, 74,812 Kansas City, 60,425 Miami, 60,127 Washington, 55,004

This means that in the four weeks the two leagues had gone head-to-head, 13 NFL games had outdrawn that week's WFL total attendance figures!!

Critical, indeed.

The meeting was called just a week after the Wiffle assessed the other nine teams a total of $300,000 to keep the Portland franchise afloat. Portland's problems were much more significant than Philadelphia's although the Thunder was doing slightly better at the gate. Philadelphia's ownership was much better financed, and the Portland group of 10 stockholders had grown splintered due to the lack of a single strong leader within the group.

Despite the problems the team faced, a club official in Portland said it would "be a mistake" to shut down that franchise. "I look at the standings and we're 1-0 in the fall season," he said, "We'll have good crowds the next two weeks, especially this week with Jacksonville."

League owners were beginning to realize that the awful attendance figures in many cities were turning their dream of a second major-league football league into a bloody nightmare. Average attendance had declined to 13,371 for the season, a slump of 28 percent.

"The home teams get 60 percent, the visitors 40," said a league spokesman, "and 40 percent at a place where the attendance is in the area of 4,000, well, you lose a ton of money just playing there."

In addition to Philadelphia and Portland, San Antonio was another trouble spot, as club officials there said they had to obtain at least $450,000 to finish the season.

"We think the problems in San Antonio are the most critical and need to be solved," said the league spokesman.

Another rumor had the Birmingham team favoring a plan that would cut the league down to six southern teams. "The Birmingham people are really pushing for a six-team southern league," said Bassett, "I'm not sure about that plan. I wouldn't want to be a minor-leaguer. I think I'm a major leaguer . . . maybe I'm not one, but I like to think of myself as big league."

In the end, of course, for better or worse, the league owners met and agreed to continue with the league intact. Major league or minor league, they decided, was better than no league.

At a press conference in New York City on the 14th, Hemmeter announced the league would continue with all ten teams. "We are not going to indulge in any more speculation about the viability of the WFL because its viability to us has never been questionable," Hemmeter said.

But the meeting and the agreement to continue only delayed the inevitable.

In what turned out to be the Wiffle's last weekend, its teams did horrible business. In Philadelphia, only 1,293 fans showed up in Franklin Field to see the Bell play Charlotte. Shreveport drew only 8,581 folks for their game with San Antonio. Portland's game against Jacksonville saw only 8,713 diehards click through the turnstiles. In Honolulu 15, 905 fans attended the game against Southern California. Only Birmingham (what a surprise!) did good business, drawing an estimated 35,000 to Legion Field for the Vulcans big matchup against Memphis. But when one of your games outdraws the *total* of the other four—you know the handwriting is on the wall.

Still, despite the horrendous figures, Chris Hemmeter, who watched the Memphis-Birmingham game in the Legion Field press box, tried to remain upbeat.

"The crowd was fantastic and their reaction was great," Hemmeter told reporters, adding that the crowd of 35,000 was "extremely encouraging."

"We are still working on the attendance problem, which is the key to the WFL's future," Hemmeter went on, "We are trying to shore up our weaknesses and capitalize on our strengths.

"We think we have a great product and great cities. We have no problems that 18,000 a week won't cure and that isn't too much to ask for."

But most of the WFL wasn't drawing anywhere near 18,000 a game. In the end, it really was too much to ask for.

The owners and league officials met again on October 22nd. Hemmeter detailed the current status of each of the Wiffle's franchises. Memphis, Birmingham and Southern California were doing well. Jacksonville had the finances to make it but their attendance figures were declining weekly. Philadelphia also had the financing necessary to continue but their attendance figures might have been the worst in the history of professional football. Charlotte lacked finances but at least their attendance was improving. The Hawaiians were suffering from low attendance and a huge rent payment on Aloha stadium. San Antonio needed cash to stay afloat. Portland and Shreveport were out of cash and in dire straits.

The outlook was grim. The league was in deep, deep financial trouble. Several owners wanted to simply fold the two worst franchises, identified as Portland and Philadelphia, and continue to play. That proposal was voted down. Another proposal was to let Birmingham, Memphis and Southern California immediately take part in a championship playoff series. That proposal was shot down as well.

After quite a bit of deliberation, the owners finally took a vote and only four clubs—Jacksonville, Charlotte, San Antonio and Southern California—voted to keep the Wiffle in business. Memphis and Birmingham, rumored to be vying for entry into the NFL, did not see a point in bailing out their destitute brothers. They, along with the rest, voted to fold up their tents.

A little later that day, Hemmeter held a press conference and announced that the WFL was finished.

"There were no problems that 20,000 people in every stadium wouldn't have solved," Hemmeter announced, "but we found it's harder to renovate an old house than to build a new one.

"Our gate receipts have been disappointing," Hemmeter went on, "Our league average through last week's games is 13,371 paid admissions. Furthermore, attendance over the past five weeks declined 28 percent on a league-wide basis, causing severe financial drains on each franchise.

"They say pro sports can take a grown man and make a child out of him in a matter of minutes," Hemmeter continued, "But prudence prevailed in our decision. Seven of our board members are directors of banks."

Hemmeter said that it would have taken a two-year expenditure of $25-million to $40-million to save the league and make it a success.

"In light of an unstable economy, continuing inflation, no assurance of national television rights and a softening market for new sports leagues," Hemmeter went on, "we considered this enormous expenditure an unwise investment."

Referring to the shambles of rubber checks and payless paydays that epitomized the WFL of 1974, Hemmeter said, "I thought that righting a wrong would certainly be rewarded and we would attract strong public support due to our insistence on a businesslike atmosphere. This was not the case. The 1974 problems haunted us, the lack of credibility stayed with us. We found that paying bills was not enough to save the WFL.

"We failed in marketing. Possibly I was the wrong person to head up the league," Hemmeter continued, "Maybe pro sports are a little too swinging for me. I'm conservative and I don't have public appeal and flamboyance. We had excitement on the field, but the league lacked excitement. Most of us are bankers and we lacked charisma, mystique."

"The meeting in New York focused on our ability to penetrate the market," Hemmeter recalled, "Unless we could attract the fans and see signs of support from the communities, it would be ridiculous to plow forward. Not only did the ownership group report a lack of support in the communities but also a lack of support from the local governments. The politicians and local authorities came down so hard on the franchises due to past deeds that they weren't going to let us up. Without their support, it was an uphill battle that we couldn't fight. The owners felt that this wouldn't correct itself in time."

Hemmeter had to admit that his Plan failed because it did not provide the most basic necessity for a sports league to succeed . . . attracting fans to the games in order to generate revenue.

"You can have an exciting product," Hemmeter explained, "but if it doesn't have customer appeal on the shelf, it's worthless."

The two versions of the WFL were as different as night and day, but it's not difficult to see why both of them failed miserably. In 1974, the WFL was flamboyant, colorful, and high-profile, but at the same time frequently dishonest, led by the high-rolling California lawyer Gary Davidson. The league introduced some interesting innovations in the rules, a Day-Glo football, the Dickerrod, and King Corcoran to the average football fan. WFL people lied about attendance figures, bounced checks with the best of them, and were the butt of some first-class gallows humor.

The 1974 WFL made it through a 20-game season, more or less, then vanished amid an avalanche of bad checks and a whole passel of angry players, leaving behind some $20 million in debts.

In contrast, the 1975 version of the WFL paid its bills on time, had an established credit rating, was terribly responsible and basically displayed all the fascination and excitement of a bank directors meeting. Their press releases had about as much appeal as sowbelly futures and other assorted financial doings.

The 1975 WFL plodded responsibly through 13 weeks of the season before it died of an incredible attack of apathy.

On the night the WFL announced it was finally closing its doors, the Cincinnati Reds beat the Boston Red Sox in Game Seven of the World Series. The broadcast broke every ratings record for a televised sporting event, something the Wiffle had only been able to dream of. Their dreams of success in the American sports theater were now nothing more than nightmares, and the only breaking the league had done was under the oppressive weight of a burden of debts.

CHAPTER 21

Sweet Home Alabama . . . Part II

The Birmingham Vulcans, 1975

"I don't know about the old franchise. It probably belongs to the Internal Revenue Service or somebody."

—FERD WEIL, Owner, Birmingham Vulcans

After all the wild and crazy spending of 1974, new WFL head honcho Chris Hemmeter was bound and determined to enforce some measure of financial sanity on the league (and boy, could they use it!). Among other things, he insisted that any and all potential owners had to establish a $650,000 line of credit with the league before they would be considered, and accepted, for membership.

Bill Putnam, owner of the old Americans who could have definitely used a dose of financial sanity after his wild spending on signing bonuses bankrupted the team in '74, said he was trying to find more local investors to meet Hemmeter's requirement, but there were few takers.

Financially devastated, former Americans' team president Carol Stallworth left the football business and became a bartender in a downtown Birmingham sports bar in early 1975.

With their previous owners either begging for money or pouring brewskis for frat brothers, the Birmingham franchise was in limbo for most of the early part of 1975. There also seemed to be a verbal and legal tug-of-war happening between the owner of the Americans, Putnam, and a new group of investors which included some of the shareholders from '74.

On January 4th, 1975, Putnam addressed rumors that there was a local group wanting to purchase the Americans.

"I am working to get a letter of credit funded," said Putnam, "If and when I am successful, I will go ahead with a public stock offer. Apparently there is a group over there (in Birmingham) interested in purchasing the ball club. I don't really know who they are, but they have made approaches through the bank and the league. They have not been in touch with me personally, no. Chris Hemmeter has talked with them. He is aware of the terms it would take. I would prefer to keep the team and operate it. The league thinks selling is a good solution to the problem, but I can't say they've pressured me to sell. However, I'm not happy with that solution, though I agree with the league the team should stay in Birmingham."

Potential investors had met with Hemmeter during the week of the World Bowl and were scheduled to meet again the following week when Hemmeter was going to visit Birmingham.

In late January 1975, Hemmeter revoked the Americans' franchise due to the team's chronic financial woes. Hemmeter stated that the Americans owed a total of $2 million in bills, taxes and missed player salaries. However, Hemmeter added that the league had every intention of placing a new team in Birmingham.

Local businessmen Ferd Weil, A. E. (Pee Wee) Burgess and Fred Sington met with Hemmeter on February 11th to discuss their investment group's efforts to secure a team in the league for the 1975 season.

"There is much work to be done yet but I believe we can do it," said Burgess, an investor in the team in 1974, "The city proved it wanted pro football last year, proved it with its support, and we can't afford not to get things going again."

On February 22nd, Weil indicated that Putnam and the old Americans were out of the picture for Birmingham.

"First of all, I want to stress that we have nothing to do with the old regime," said Weil, "What we like to

say is that it's a new ball game. We're going to negotiate with players, coaches and creditors in an attempt to make arrangements to clean up the debts. However, the new group is not liable for any past debts because it did not incur them. But we're not going to turn our backs on our business friends."

Three days later, on the 25th, however, Putnam announced from his office in Atlanta that he was still very much in the franchise's picture. He stated that he would like to keep the team in Birmingham but would not rule out moving it.

"I am actively pursuing relocation of the team," said Putnam, "I am talking to a couple of cities, which I can't name at the present time. There is still a remote possibility I could get the Americans financed and stay in Birmingham, but negotiations going on over there the past few weeks make it virtually impossible."

Weil then countered by saying that his financial group wasn't concerned with Putnam. "We're not going after the franchise Mr. Putnam had," said Weil, "We don't want it. Ours is a new franchise. We'll have a new name and new policies. We have nothing whatsoever to do with Mr. Putnam. Legally, the franchise has never been taken from Alabama Football, Inc. I have attended every meeting of the World Football League and there has never been a motion passed, or introduced, to take the franchise. As far as I'm concerned, Alabama Football still owns the Birmingham Americans."

Putnam, however, said he made a deal with Hemmeter in December that all creditors and back salaries of players, coaches and staff would be taken care of by Putnam.

"Apparently, that's not the route they're taking," said Putnam, "but that's the agreement I made with Hemmeter on December 7th. What's going on in Birmingham is a complete turnaround from my understanding. I was more or less led to believe I would get another franchise in the WFL. But this has not been the case. I haven't heard from Hemmeter in three weeks, though I have been trying to contact him."

Weil responded by saying he wasn't at all concerned with Putnam's claims.

"I don't know about the old franchise. It probably belongs to the Internal Revenue Service or somebody," said Weil, "The players belong to the league, the way I understand it. But we have nothing to do with Mr. Putnam. What he does and what he owes is his business."

On March 6th, Weil, saying he was the board of directors for the new team, announced that the Birmingham WFL team for 1975 would be called the Birmingham Vulcans, a name previously registered by a group of Birmingham businessmen who had been trying to secure an NFL franchise for Birmingham. At a press conference, Weil again stressed that the name was for a new team, not a name change for the old team.

Live Long and Prosper?

Before all you geeks and Trekkies get excited out there, and contrary to popular belief, the team was not named for Mr. Spock's race of people from Star Trek. The name was homage to a team named the Birmingham Vulcans that played in the Dixie Professional Football league in 1961 and '62, and a tribute to the Roman God of Fire, Vulcan, a symbol of the city's history of iron manufacturing.

Americans head coach Jack Gotta showed his love for the name by saying, "The Birmingham Vulcans is everything we could have hoped for in a name for our new team. It personifies strength and civic pride."

Weil then discussed Gotta's status with the team, and stated that even though they didn't have a signed contract with Gotta there was an "understanding" with him.

Weil also went on to say that the *league* would assume some of the Americans debts, as well as debts of the other league cities, and *not* the new franchise.

"The Vulcans will have no part of it other than through team assessments paid to the league," said Weil, "This franchise has no connection with the old franchise. These are all new people putting their money in it. If we can't support pro football, we'll never support any other professional sport."

On March 9th, the Internal Revenue Service announced that they would put up the 59 Americans' player contracts for sale the next day in an effort to recoup the over $200,000 the franchise owed in back taxes.

Gotta said he was sure that the players and coaches would be happy for the IRS to take over their contracts and pay them all the back money owed them by the Americans. "I'm happy to know that the federal government wants to do something else with its money besides giving it to Cambodia," Gotta said.

Ten days later, on March 19th, the Vulcans announced that Gotta was going to move off the sidelines and become vice-president and general manager of the new team.

"The major problems right now are not on the field," Gotta explained, "The problems of having a team in '75 started in the shower after the World Bowl. I threw my baseball cap away that night. If we had some football people in the new organization, I'd stay on as General Manger and head coach, but there are no football people on board. I'm not frustrated coaching. I love coaching football. I know I have the background a job of this magnitude needs."

The Vulcans didn't look far for a replacement for Gotta, signing Americans' defensive coordinator Marvin Bass as the new head man.

"Marvin coached me my first year in Canada, at Calgary, and I never forgot the man. I have always made it a point to stay in touch, and he was the first coach I contacted when I came to Birmingham," Gotta said.

With Bass now the coach and Gotta the GM, Americans' quarterback Matthew Reed quickly became the first player signed by the Vulcans.

In an effort to raise capital, the Vulcans began selling shares of stock to the general public on March 21st. Priced at $10 per share and sold in blocks of 10 shares, the team hoped to raise $1.5 million with this offering.

The next day, the plot once again thickened a bit. Hemmeter sent a letter to Weil which addressed a number of issues. Hemmeter told Weil in his letter that there was currently *no* WFL franchise in Birmingham due to him revoking the franchise in January for non-payment of players, creditors and the league. He went on to assure Weil, however, that the only entity the league was negotiating with to secure a team in Birmingham was Weil's investment group, Birmingham Vulcans, Inc.

Still believing he had a team to actually sell, Putnam then claimed there was an individual interested in keeping the Americans in Birmingham. "They mailed me a copy of the minutes from a meeting on January 16th, and that was supposedly when the franchise was revoked. I also received a copy of the minutes from a meeting in Toronto on February 13th, supposedly reaffirming Alabama Football, Inc. was in default and had until March 31st to correct it. I wasn't at that meeting," Putnam said.

He wound up trying to sue the league, demanding to be compensated with the rights to a possible future franchise in New York City. Putnam added he might sell the team to an investment group in New York. "I notice Mr. Hemmeter says there will be no WFL franchise in New York this season. I may have a surprise for him," Putnam said.

Putnam never did find investment partners or buyers for his franchise. His lawsuit never materialized, and neither did a Wiffle franchise in New York. Putnam was left with only the rubble of what was once the WFL's only championship team.

A few years later, he was involved with the Super Soccer League, an indoor soccer league slated to begin play in 1978. The city was to have a franchise in the proposed league, the Birmingham Bandits, but the league never played a single game.

Finally, after all was said and done by both sides, at a press conference in Birmingham on March 29th, Hemmeter announced that the Vulcans would indeed be a part of the WFL in 1975. Hemmeter confirmed that the league put forth a maximum effort to save the old Americans.

"We spent months trying to save the franchise," said Hemmeter, "We pursued it to the fullest extent. We feel legally, ethically and morally we made the right decision. We must subordinate our feelings concerning the Americans and press on."

The Vulcans officially secured the Birmingham franchise in April 1975. A lease agreement was made for the use of Legion Field. For better or worse, WFL football was back in Birmingham.

Now that the team had owners, a name, a GM, a coach, and a field to play on, it needed players. One day before training camp opened, the Vulcans signed former University of Alabama star running back Johnny Musso to a contract. Musso had played out his option in the CFL. The popular running back was considered the cornerstone of the new franchise.

The "Italian Stallion," as he was called, was an All-American when he played for Banks High School and went on to become a two-time college All-American at Alabama. After playing for the Crimson Tide from 1969 through '71, Musso played for two years in the Canadian Football League with the British Columbia Lions.

Gotta said he wanted Musso on the team in 1974 with the Americans, but he was unable to get him. In 1975, Musso entered an option season in his contract and Gotta was able to pull quite a few strings to bring him back home. "It is with a lot of deep emotion that I'm here tonight. I want to thank Coach Gotta for getting me here. His contacts in the CFL were responsible for getting me out this year," Musso said.

Besides signing Musso, the Vulcans were one of the most successful teams in re-signing their top players from '74. In all, the team managed to re-sign 27 players from their championship club, including running backs Art Cantrelle and Joe Profit, quarterback

Matthew Reed, offensive linemen Paul Costa, Jim Kregel, John Matlock, Al Sitterle, Wimpy Winther and Bob Wolfe, tight ends Bob Brown, Jim Bishop and Ted Powell, defensive linemen Larry Estes, Bob Tatarek, Dick Trower and Jessie Wolf, linebackers Warren Capone, Ron Foxx, Steve Manstedt, and Jimmy Teal, and defensive backs William Bryant, George Haynes, Willie Smith, Gerard Williams and Larry Willingham.

"We feel like we've filled all the vacated spots with sound people except at wide receiver," said Marvin Bass, "Right now we only have one good wide receiver and that's Dennis Homan. Injuries have hampered us in this area. We think we have two kids with lots of potential in Thomas Gossom and Porter Williams. They've got pulled hamstrings and haven't been able to practice much."

Because they had been able to retain most of their talent, the Vulcans were tabbed by some to repeat as league champions.

They sure looked like a good bet as they clobbered Portland, 25-9, and edged Shreveport, 31-30 in their exhibition games.

The game in Shreveport showed just how suspicious and wary the general public was about the "New WFL," however. Gil Lebreton, now a sports writer covering the Dallas Cowboys, but then working in the Vulcans' publicity department, recalled what happened before that game.

"As publicity man for the Birmingham franchise, the Vulcans," Lebreton wrote in 2006 for the website cowboyszone.com, "I had to fly to Shreveport in advance to help stir up media interest in our preseason game. But when I gave the lady at the rental car counter my company credit card, the initials "W-F-L" must have set sirens ringing from Hawaii to Jacksonville. Apparently, the former owners of the Birmingham franchise had left a few unpaid bills in their wake on the way to World Bowl I. When I relayed the problem by telephone to our new general manager, Jack Gotta, he asked, 'We're OK with the stadium and everything, right?' "

The shenanigans of the '74 season had cast a pall over the entire league, and obviously, no one, no matter how financially sound, was safe from the lack of credibility.

After winning their two preseason games, the Vulcans' continued their winning ways as they shut out Chicago 10-0 in the regular season opener before a decent crowd of 29,000 at Legion Field. Birmingham virtually blanketed the Chicago offense, holding it to only 205 yards in total offense and forcing five turnovers. Art Cantrelle (94 yards and a touchdown) and Musso (72 yards) paced a solid running game.

Birmingham then stopped Philadelphia, 23-17, before 21,000 people in Legion Field. Musso, despite the fact that his #22 jersey was stolen the day before the game, and he had to wear a #20 jersey instead, ran for 88 yards and Matthew Reed rushed for two touchdowns. The crowd for the Bell game was not as good as it might have been because city employees threatened to picket the game—Legion Field was a city-owned facility—which prompted a temporary restraining order on Friday the 8th. Rumors flew that the game might be postponed despite denials from the Vulcans' front office. Rain showers just prior to kickoff hurt attendance as well.

At 2-and-0, Birmingham was indeed looking like the odds-on favorite to repeat as league champions. Both their offense and defense were performing well. But thoughts of an undefeated season came crashing down a week later as Jacksonville, led by ex-Birmingham quarterback George Mira, clipped the Vulcans, 22-11. Birmingham turned the ball over seven times and was whistled for 10 penalties in losing to the Express. "We were lucky we didn't lose by more than we did," said Marvin Bass, "We made silly mistakes all evening—dropping the ball, penalties, missed assignments. We just didn't play well at all."

Matthew Reed suffered a hip injury and was expected to miss a couple games, and the Vulcans also lost strong safety Chris Arnold to season-ending knee surgery.

Back home, the confines of Legion Field were not so friendly, at least as far as the Southern California Sun were concerned. Before 32,000 fans, Birmingham lost for the first time in 17 home games, 35-25. Duron, playing in place of the injured Reed, hit on just 8 of 22 passes and had two throws picked off, one of them by Tim Guy that set up the Sun's go-ahead touchdown in the third quarter. The Vulcans also coughed up three fumbles.

"It was certainly disappointing," said Marvin Bass, "especially after the way we came back just before the half. Our kicking game killed us. Two fumbled punts set up two touchdowns for them. We're killing ourselves."

"Anthony Davis is probably the finest back I've ever seen," Bass added, "They simply have outstanding talent."

Birmingham was outgained by the Sun, 357 yards to 189, and thoroughly outplayed. They were shut out in the second half.

Talk of a championship had ended as the Vulcans' record had now dropped to 2-and-2. The team had played poorly and in both instances had beaten themselves.

But Birmingham rebounded to beat Shreveport, 21-8, before a crowd of 18,700 in Legion Field. "It was great to come back and win against Shreveport after losing two in a row," said Marvin Bass, "We played hard, but we still gave the ball away too many times with errors. Turnovers have been a big problem for us, and it's something we just haven't been able to lick."

Reed was back under center for Birmingham and had a solid game, setting up the Vulcans' second touchdown and both field goals with his passing. Birmingham led at the half, 13-0, and when Shreveport scored to trim the margin to 13-8, Reed responded with a beautiful 28-yard pass to tight end Bob Brown to the Steamer 4-yard line. Brown was knocked unconscious after the catch and the fans sat in stone silence as doctors attended to the tight end. He was taken to a local hospital for observation, but was fine. After Brown's catch Johnny Musso scored from the one, and Art Cantrelle added the action point to sew it up. During the last seven minutes, the Vulcans defense kept the Steamer at bay by intercepting two passes and batting another to the ground in the end zone.

One week after sacking the Shreveport quarterbacks four times, the Vulcans' defense sacked Portland's Don Horn three times in crushing the Thunder, 26-8. "We changed coverages on Horn and it confused him some," said assistant Ardell Weigandt, "We showed him a couple coverages we hadn't used before, things designed to take away what he does best." Johnny Musso twisted a knee and missed the second half, but Art Cantrelle filled in just fine, rushing for 79 yards and three touchdowns.

The Vulcans, now 4-and-2, came home to face San Antonio, in first place in the West with a 5-and-2 mark. Despite the fact that it was a marquee matchup and it was a beautiful night, the game drew only 12,500 fans to Legion Field, the smallest crowd in the team's history. "A lot of people in Birmingham missed a helluva football game," said assistant coach Lynn Amedee.

Ron Slovensky booted three field goals, giving him a league-leading 11 for the season, while Matthew Reed, healthy again after his hip injury, threw for two touchdowns and ran for another, and the Vulcans defeated the Wings, 33-24.

"Matthew Reed was simply super and when he's ready to play, no one can stop him," crowed Marvin Bass.

After Reed hit Robert Evans for a 72-yard touchdown, the longest in the league so far, and Nate Fergerson for a 46-yard score, Bass exclaimed that the receiving duo "really showed us what they can do. They can run deep and Matthew has the arm to hit them."

At 5-and-2, the Vulcans were in first place in the East. "As far as who the team to beat is in the WFL," stated Bass, "I think it is Birmingham."

The Vulcans won their fourth in a row by storming back from a 16-7 fourth quarter deficit to edge the Hornets, 22-16, before another sparse crowd of 18,500, on a beautiful 79-degree day under clear skies. Birmingham snapped Charlotte's 4-game winning streak in the process. Bill Rudder, a rookie from Tennessee, plunged over from a yard out to cut the Hornets' lead to 16-14. Matthew Reed rolled around right end and raced 32 yards for the winning touchdown with only 3:04 to play.

"Matthew Reed is just a sensational quarterback," said Bass, after watching his signal caller throw for 133 yards and run for 66 more. "I'd sure hate to have to defend him. He's had two sensational games back-to-back now."

A week later in the Gator Bowl, however, the Vulcans were once again haunted by their old pal George Mira, who called a masterful game as the Express bumped off the Vulcans, 26-18, snapping Birmingham's four-game winning streak. Birmingham, having to play a three-man defensive line due to injuries to Harry Gooden and Jessie Wolf, didn't sack or intercept Mira once during the game. "I have to give George Mira a lot of credit for calling a great game," said Bass, "He had another hot night against us."

The loss tightened up the Eastern Division standings. Memphis led the division with a record of 6-and-2, followed closely by the Vulcans at 6-and-3 and Jacksonville at 5-and-3.

"When we lost Nate Fergerson it really took away from our passing game," added Bass, referring to the wide receiver who was lost during the game to a knee injury.

"We fumbled and made too many mistakes," Bass continued, "but we can't make excuses. When you get beat you get beat. I don't think it's the fact we were on the road. We just didn't have it together."

Despite the loss, the Vulcans still had a chance at the East Division's Summer Season title if they beat The Hawaiians, and Memphis lost to Southern California. On Saturday the 4th, Birmingham managed only 63

total yards in the first half and fell behind in Honolulu, 16-8 at halftime. But Bass turned Musso (70 yards and a touchdown) and Cantrelle (93 yards and two scores) loose in the second half, and the Vulcans came back to win, 29-16.

"It was a good win for us," said Bass. "The second half was as fine as we've played all year." But when Memphis edged Southern California the next day, 37-33, Birmingham missed out on the East Division pennant.

The Vulcans flew back from Hawaii to Memphis, where the Grizzlies had not lost a regular season game in, well, forever. A decent crowd of 20,192 was on hand and they saw a game that lived up to the pregame billing. "You won't see football played better than that anywhere, in any league," GM Jack Gotta would say after the game.

The only score in the first half came on a 20-yard touchdown pass from Danny White to Ed Marshall. In the third quarter, Birmingham took the second half kickoff and marched 64 yards in 10 plays, the 10th a 4-yard run by Musso to put the Vulcans up 8-7.

Birmingham then slowly started taking control of the game, using its powerful running game to eat up yardage and the clock. Art Cantrelle, who wound up with 124 yards rushing, scored on a 2-yard run to put the Vulcans up, 15-7.

But Memphis came right back with another White to Marshall scoring pass to make the score 15-14 as the game moved into the fourth quarter.

A 22-yard field goal by Slovensky gave the Vulcans a bit of breathing room at 18-14, and the Birmingham rushing attack, which wound up gaining 232 yards, was keeping the ball out of Memphis' hands. But with 2:35 left, the Grizzlies took over on their own 21 and moved steadily downfield as White used the clock to perfection. A 36-yard pass to John Harvey put the ball on the Birmingham 18. Finally on fourth down and 13 from the 21, White aimed a pass at Marshall. The receiver and two defenders collided, and Marshall and the ball bounced to the turf. At first the officials ruled it a touchdown, a decision that brought the Birmingham coaches and players onto the field in protest. When order was restored and the officials huddled, the call was then reversed, and ruled an incomplete pass. That brought the Memphis contingent onto the field. Again, ordered had to be restored, and when it was, Birmingham ran out the clock and won the game.

When the gun sounded, the officials were quickly whisked away in Shelby County squad cars with Memphis coach John McVay in hot pursuit, pounding on the windows.

"I was behind him when the ball got there," said safety Jim McKinney, "I was the closest one to him and he never had it. I tried to rake the ball from him and when we hit, the ball fell to the ground incomplete."

The controversial win gave Birmingham an 8-and-3 record, best in the league, a half game ahead of Memphis. The two clubs were due for a rematch in Birmingham in a week.

But would the game even be played? The WFL owners were called to an emergency meeting in New York on Monday the 13th to discuss the future of the league, and if indeed the league had a future. Reports had the league meeting to consider three alternatives—fold the league's weaker teams and continue; financially prop up the weaker teams and continue; or give up the ghost and fold up shop. Gotta was asked his thoughts about the meeting.

"I haven't heard from our representatives at the meeting," Gotta told reporters, "but I have to assume no news is good news. If they wanted to fold the league, they could have done that in five minutes. Apparently, Chris Hemmeter and the governors are trying to hammer out a solution to save the league. That's my reaction."

Sure enough, the solution they hammered out in New York was to keep playing and not fold the league or any of the teams. The rematch was on in Birmingham. How much longer the league would survive after that was open to conjecture.

The rematch between the Vulcans and Memphis brought 35,000 people out to Legion Field, the largest crowd to watch the team in over a year, since September 7th, 1974, when the Americans faced the Chicago Fire.

Birmingham, who defensive end Jessie Wolf said was "ready to play today," scored two touchdowns within 58 seconds in the first quarter on their way to a 21-0 win over Memphis in their rematch after their controversial game of the week before. After Matthew Reed—"Matthew had another good day," Bass said, "and when Matthew has a good day, it's kinda easy"—hit Denny Duron with a 14-yard scoring pass, Memphis' Tommy Campbell fumbled the ensuing kickoff and the Vulcs scored four plays later on a three-yard run by Art Cantrelle. Birmingham never looked back after that in handing Memphis its first ever shutout.

"There was no secret to our shutting them out," said linebacker Warren Capone, who led Birmingham with 10 tackles, "We played hard, and with the most emotion of the season."

But while the Vulcans had drawn a decent crowd, the rest of the league played in near empty stadiums. The other four games that weekend drew a total—a *total* mind you, *not* an average—of 34,492 people.

When one game can outdraw the rest of the games on the schedule, you know you are in deep trouble. The pitiful crowds made the WFL owners re-think their decision of the week before. Another meeting was called, and when the conference was finally adjourned, Chris Hemmeter announced that the league was folding its tents. The Wiffle had finally given up the ghost.

But that was far from the end of the story as far as the Birmingham team was concerned. That's because when the decision was made to fold the Wiffle, Birmingham officials were already at work trying to secure a future in the National Football League.

GM Jack Gotta went to Memphis to meet with John Bassett to formulate a plan for a two franchise request for the NFL. "I think our chances of getting in the NFL are the best of any city in America which doesn't have a franchise already," said Gotta, "We have all the necessary ingredients . . . ownership, the greatest fans in football and a stadium that seats 70,000. The last two years have proved people here will support professional football. The fact we did close down in October means we will make application for the 1976 season, but we're not in control of anything and we'll have to abide by whatever timetable the NFL decides on."

George Siebels, Birmingham's Mayor, announced that he would telegraph NFL Commissioner Rozelle immediately to petition for entry to the league.

"I don't look at it as an ending," said Marvin Bass, "I look at it as the beginning of something big. I'm psychic in some ways and that's the way I feel."

Bass was hopefully told not to quit his day job and apply for a position with the Psychic Hotline. Because in the end, neither Birmingham nor Memphis gained entry into the NFL. The story of the Vulcans ended on October 22nd with the rest of the League.

But the Americans / Vulcans were highly thought of for years after the Wiffle ceased to exist. The Birmingham Bulls of the World Hockey Association held "Jack Gotta Night" on December 26th, 1976, in honor of the former Americans head coach.

Fans of the Americans organized a reunion celebration held July 9th and 10th, 2004, in honor of the 30th anniversary of Birmingham's first game played on July 10th, 1974.

One reason for the festivities was to help pay for the promised World Bowl championship rings that many players did not receive from the financially-failing franchise. *Dayton Daily News* sportswriter Chick Ludwig discovered the omission while doing research for a book. He used his investigative skills to find that Jonsil Manufacturing in El Paso, Texas, made the original rings and could create replacement rings for $809 each. The story received national attention which prompted Nestlé and the Arena Football League2 Birmingham Steeldogs to help sponsor the reunion at the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame in Birmingham.

Thirty years after winning the WFL's only championship, the Americans finally got their rings.

CHAPTER 22

Gone to Carolina . . . Part II

The Charlotte Hornets, 1975

"They've got to get the league straightened out first."
—Charlotte Mayor JOHN BELK,
when asked if he'd be investing in the Hornets in 1975

The Charlotte Hornets franchise returned for the 1975 campaign, but it didn't take long for the team to realize that the bloom was off the rose, and that the honeymoon they enjoyed when they moved to Charlotte in 1974 was over. Unlike '74, the city did not exactly welcome back the Hornets with open arms.

Instead of parades, bands and proclamations, the franchise was met with hesitant investors, empty stadium seats, and apathetic fans. The Hornets had serious problems finding investors who were willing to put money into the franchise. The sins of '74 were hanging over the team just like it did the rest of the league. This was making it hard for the Hornets to meet their obligations under the set-up that the "New" WFL was working under. As part of the Hemmeter Plan, any and all ownership groups interested in fielding a team in '75 had to deposit $650,000 into a league account. This was to ensure that the group was solvent and could cover their bills. Despite meetings with civic leaders and potential investors, the Hornets had so far been unable to meet this goal.

"We are looking at an alternative to private investment and will have a decision very soon," said Upton Bell, who then announced on January 20th that the Hornets would offer a public stock sale in an attempt to raise funds. He added that the goal was to sell $100 shares with a goal of selling $1.5-million of stock. "If we can get 300 investors of $5,000 each, we can make our goal," Bell said.

Bell was able to convince golf legend Arnold Palmer to invest in the team, but found very little interest elsewhere. In an effort to raise capital, Don Bryant, the president of the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, invited between 100 and 140 would-be investors to meet with Hemmeter; only 29 showed up. Then the Charlotte Jaycees sent invitations to 200 companies to come hear a sales pitch for the Hornets. Only two people appeared.

Charlotte Mayor John Belk, so instrumental in bringing the Hornets to Charlotte in 1974, at first balked about investing in the club. He said in December of '74 that the WFL would have to settle down before he would consider investing in it again.

"They've got to get the league straightened out first and they're trying to do that now," said Belk, who was under some pressure from the Hornets' Booster Club to make a personal commitment to assist in the survival of the franchise in Charlotte. The Club had sent petitions with about 1,200 names on them to the mayor's office urging him to support the club.

"This is not the time to give up," said Upton Bell, "It's too damn easy in life to give up." But even an eternal optimist like Bell had to be disappointed when the promise of a mystery man to invest $600,000 fell through. The bank reported he didn't have sufficient funds in his account to cover his check. The mystery investor beat a hasty retreat out of town.

By the middle of February, however, Mayor Belk had switched gears, and offered to donate his salary for the year, $11,000, to help raise the money needed to support the Hornets.

But the public stock offering fell far short of expectations, raising only $360,000, nowhere near enough to meet the league's financial conditions.

City officials kept plugging along, however, and with Belk, Bryant and a local business leader named H. E. Pollack leading the way, the franchise was finally

able to raise about $755,000, short of their goal, but enough to cover the WFL payment. The Hornets were then admitted to the WFL for 1975, although many felt the league did this just to cover up the Wiffle's overall financial uncertainty.

Not only were the Hornets facing some financial questions, but some personnel ones as well, as quite a few of the veteran players from '74 had retired or decided not to return for another season. George Sauer, the team's leading receiver, wide receiver Al Barnes, center Bob Kuziel, and defensive stalwarts John Elliott, Gerry Philbin, John Dockery and Carter Campbell were all gone. Without their defensive stars from '74, the Hornets would manage only seven sacks all year in 1975.

Babe Parilli, who had coached the team in 1974, "could not get together on terms" with Bell, according to the GM, and Bell said he began negotiations with Memphis offensive backfield assistant coach Bob Gibson in late April. Gibson was hired to replace Parilli, who left to coach the Chicago Winds, on May 14th. Bell would not reveal Gibson's contract terms, but did say that he was hired "for more than one year."

Because he was hired so late—only a couple months before training camp opened—Gibson had to scramble to find talent. He re-signed the team's top two rushers from 1974, Don Highsmith and Bob Gladieux; quarterback Tom Sherman; leading kickoff returner Ike Thomas, and all-WFL safety Jeff Woodcock. The Hornets also acquired safety Terry Hoeppner from Detroit and center Charles Tiblom from Memphis. On July 7th, the team obtained cornerback Sonny Hicks from Memphis for two 1976 draft choices.

In order to drum up local interest, Charlotte also signed a lot of players with ties to the Carolinas, including defensive end Bennie Barbour from Winston-Salem State, running back Carl Bartles from Lenoir Rhyne, wide receiver Randy Cobb and defensive end J.T. Turner from Duke, offensive tackle Carl Collins from North Carolina A & T, linebacker Tom Embrey, fullback Lewis Jolley and quarterback Chris Kupec from North Carolina, offensive tackle Jerome Gantt from North Carolina Central, offensive tackle Tom Frazier from East Carolina, and defensive tackle Sam Senneca from North Carolina State.

The local boys didn't seem to make much difference to the fans, however. The Hornets had one home exhibition game, and it didn't bode well for the season. On a beautiful afternoon with clear blue skies, only 2,726 fans attended the game in Winston-Salem. The Hornets rallied to win 22-21, and the local press tried to put a positive spin on things by calling the crowd "appreciative," but no matter how they cut it, 2,726 appreciative people were still just 2,726 people.

By now, it was the middle of July and the team still had not decided on a practice site for the regular season. Upton Bell said the club would not return to Belmont Abbey College where they practiced in '74. He added that several locations were being considered.

The team finally had to settle on a local park to hold their practices. It definitely left a lot to be desired. It had only four showers, no goal posts and for a time the field had no yard lines. The team had to use the park's kitchen as their locker room, with old newspapers taped on the windows to give the players some privacy. Seeing as it was a public park, kids playing Frisbee would sometimes disrupt practice.

On July 22nd, the Hornets cut their leading rusher from 1974, Bob Gladieux, along with seven other players. Gladieux had reported late to camp and then was used sparingly in the Hornets' two exhibition games.

The undermanned Hornets, who had veterans Tom Chandler, David Blake, and Davey Richards, and rookies Tom Frazier and Sam Senneca all out with injuries, opened the regular season in San Antonio against the Wings.

Defensive tackle David Douglas, who had seven unassisted tackles and a sack against Chicago, got the starting nod over Carl Collins. The Wings had passed the ball over 80 times in the preseason, and Gibson thought it would be interesting to see how his club handled the San Antonio passing attack.

"They do a lot of passing," Gibson said, "but I feel as if we have one of the better defensive secondaries in the league. Last week, their quarterback threw 32 times, completed only 10 and had four intercepted.

"I think our defensive backs will give their quarterbacks some problems. Woodcock and Thomas are two of the best safeties in the WFL, and it will be interesting to see what results if San Antonio throws as much as they did the first two weeks."

The Hornets' secondary held its own against the Wings, allowing just 10 completions in 24 attempts for 113 yards and picking off two passes. Charlotte, meanwhile, had more first downs and more total yards than the Wings, but they had trouble holding on to the ball. They turned the ball over seven times, four times on fumbles and three times on interceptions.

"None of those fumbles should have happened. Either we will make some changes in our lineups or we'll bring in some people who can do the job," said an obviously disgusted Gibson, "We just can't let this kind

of thing continue." A 10-8 halftime lead disintegrated in the second half as their first three possessions ended in fumbles, and the next three were killed by interceptions. On the seventh possession, the Wings' defense stopped the Hornets on a fourth down-and-one play.

"This is something you can't work on very well in practice," Gibson continued, "These situations only occur on the field. It's a matter of drilling into them the importance of concentration. If they can't build that concentration, then we'll just have to get other people."

Charlotte lost, 27-10. "We just gave the game away," Gibson went on, "This was a give-away game because we had control of it." The team also lost the services of yet another player, running back Ed White, for the season with torn ligaments in his knee and a separated shoulder. He was hurt on the last play of the first quarter after carrying twice for 10 yards.

Two days after the game, the Hornets re-signed running back Carl Bartles to replace the injured White, and also released veteran guard Len St. Jean and signed offensive tackle Gary Gennerich, who played with Birmingham in 1974.

"Lennie has been an outstanding performer," said Upton Bell, "However, this was a decision that had to be made in order for us to continually upgrade our program with youth. We are going to be looking at a lot of new people this week."

In another move to shore up their depleted offensive line, the Hornets picked up guard John Jacquot from Memphis on August 1st for some draft choices.

The Hornets had a week off, but the layoff didn't help. Once again, Charlotte had the lead at halftime, this time 11-0 over Memphis. Pete Rajecki kicked a 25-yard field goal, and on the ensuing kickoff, offensive guard John Culpepper, acquired from Southern California in training camp, hit David Thomas who fumbled. Linebacker Tom Embrey grabbed the ball in mid-air and returned it 22 yards to set up a Brian Dowling to Kreg Kapitan touchdown pass and the 11-0 edge. But once again, for the second straight game, the Hornets collapsed in the second half. The Grizzlies erupted for 23 unanswered points and won, 23-11, dropping Charlotte to 0-and-2 and into the East Division basement.

"After they scored their first touchdown, we couldn't move and they were able to control the ball," said Gibson.

After the two losses on the road to open the season, the Hornets returned home to host San Antonio on August 16th.

Usually a home opener is a well attended affair. In 1974, the Hornets had welcomed 25,133 fans for their first game. For the '75 opener, Bell was hoping for a crowd over 10,000, but ticket manager Guy Charles said a couple days before the game that sales were only "over 4,000." In the end, only 8,447 fans were in attendance, a disappointing figure Bell still called a "small miracle. I didn't even think we'd have 5,000 here tonight—we only had 3,200 tickets sold at three o'clock this afternoon." Bell probably just hoped the small figure was not a portent of things to come. Unfortunately, it was.

Charlotte had blown leads to lose its first two games, but this time the Hornets exploded for 19 fourth quarter points to rally from behind and defeat San Antonio, 27-20.

"We were down at the half but we really didn't do anything different to get ready for the second half," said Gibson, "We knew what we could do against them and just stayed with those things."

Lewis Jolley rushed for a game-high 72 yards and a touchdown early in the fourth quarter that cut the lead to 20-16. "We knew we had to win this game," said Jolley, "It was a big game for us."

The Wings proceeded to fumble the ensuing kickoff and Jerry Ellison recovered for the Hornets on the San Antonio 25. That set up a 37-yard field goal by Pete Rajecki. The Wings then went three-and-out, and Charlotte scored yet again on a 57-yard pass from Sherman to Danny Whyte.

"San Antonio was in a double zone, concentrating on the outside receivers," Gibson explained, "With the secondary going wide, we were able to break Danny up the middle."

Sherman completed 11 of 21 passes for 216 yards, one touchdown, and three action point conversions. "Tom did a great job of reading their defense," said Gibson.

"If you keep plugging away, some good things are bound to happen," said Sherman, "We didn't quit and we could have. I think everybody is pretty happy with the results."

Terry Hoeppner had five tackles on defense and also blocked a San Antonio field goal try.

Wide receiver Kreg Kapitan said he felt the win could turn the Hornets' season around. "People have said we don't have a superstar, and they are right," offered Kapitan, who caught an action point pass, "But we've got a pretty good team. We played together tonight—the offensive line did a great job and the rest of us know it—and if we keep playing together, we'll keep winning."

The Hornets continued to make personnel moves to improve the team. On August 27th, the team added

defensive back Randy Rhino. A day later, they activated running back Jim Ford, offensive tackle Carl Collins and defensive tackle Marty Smith.

The Hornets then traveled to Jacksonville to face the surprisingly tough Express. "The Express has a wide open offense," said defensive end Cliff Greenfield, "Tommy Reamon and Alfred Haywood have the great speed to get outside. We have to contain those sweeps."

"And with George Mira throwing, they have a strong passing offense," added linebacker Tom Chandler, "We have to keep the heat on him."

Charlotte did just that, forcing four turnovers and holding Jacksonville to just 54 yards in the first half. They harassed Mira into a 6 of 14 passing night before driving him from the game, and held Haywood and Reamon to a total of only 83 yards on the ground. The Hornets evened their record at 2-and-2 with a 33-14 thumping of Jacksonville.

The Hornets scored the very first time they had the ball on a one-yard plunge by Don Highsmith, who finished with 99 yards on the ground. Lewis Jolley, one of the local boys recruited by the team to help spur interest in the club, scored two touchdowns. Despite a steady rain, quarterback Tom Sherman hit on his first seven passing attempts and wound up completing 9 of 11 tosses for 119 yards. Most of the time, Sherman picked on the injury-depleted left side of the Express defense. "We went to the left and we were successful," Sherman said, "so we just continued that success."

"We got the football and we controlled it," said Bob Gibson, "The rains actually helped us because it could have been a different game if we hadn't scored before it rained."

On September 6th, Charlotte shut out Philadelphia, 10-0 but just 10,500 people—some reports put the figure closer to 8,500—showed up. It didn't help that the game, like so many the WFL played in 1975, was held in a driving rainstorm. Both clubs had trouble getting anything going offensively. Sherman hit on only 1 pass all day, and the two teams combined for four turnovers.

After the Hornets gained just 16 yards in the first half, Gibson said the team made adjustments to its game plan in the second half. "The footing was so bad inside that we decided to go outside," said the head coach, "Highsmith did great and it was a great job in a lot of adversity by Tom."

The new plan worked. After a scoreless first half, Highsmith, who finished with a game-high 101 yards rushing, capped a 90-yard 11-play drive with a 27-yard burst to the end zone.

Philadelphia threatened in the third quarter when the Hornets fumbled and defensive back Herb Lynch returned it to the Charlotte 21. But the Hornet defense stiffened and then the Bell missed a field goal try.

Punter Robby Reynolds also buried the Bell deep in their own end on a pair of coffin corner kicks, one that reached the one-yard line and the other which was downed at the four.

Pete Rajecki added his fifth field goal in five tries with a 37-yarder to set the final at 10-0. Linebacker Jere Brown sealed the shutout by intercepting a Philadelphia pass at his own two-yard line in the final seconds.

"People keep talking about what the Hornets don't have and what I don't have," said Highsmith after the game, "But I think we have a lot of talent and determination. If we keep playing well long enough, they'll get the message."

Highsmith, the WFL Player of the Week for his performance against Philadelphia, sent a message to his detractors with another good game a week later, scoring two touchdowns as the Hornets won again, 30-22, over Southern California in Anaheim. "I feel like I am as good as any running back in the league," said Highsmith, "And this year I am going all out to prove it." Charlotte erased a 22-15 fourth-quarter deficit to win their fourth game in a row.

"If you challenge the Sun offense, they can be stopped," said Gibson, after watching the Hornets intercept four passes and get two quarterback sacks, "Our pass defense did the job."

In the waning minutes, the Sun moved 65 yards to the Charlotte one-yard line. But the Hornets rose up and stuffed 240-pound fullback Greg Herd, and when an offside penalty gave Southern California another chance, Charlotte stopped Herd again just inches short of the goal line.

A week later, the Hornets took their four-game winning streak into Birmingham for a big Eastern Division showdown with the Vulcans. Charlotte, at 4-and-2, trailed Birmingham, 5-and-2, by half a game in the standings. The Hornets offense wasn't the most effective in the WFL, but at least they had learned how to hold onto the ball, as their 13 fumbles were the second fewest in the league.

The Vulcans took the opening kickoff and marched to the Charlotte six-yard line. But when Johnny Musso tried to go up the middle, the Hornets hit him hard and he fumbled. The ball squirted into the end zone where defensive back Sonny Hicks fell on it for a touchback.

The Hornets fell behind 7-0 when Birmingham scored on their next possession, but Sherman responded by

defensive back Randy Rhino. A day later, they activated running back Jim Ford, offensive tackle Carl Collins and defensive tackle Marty Smith.

The Hornets then traveled to Jacksonville to face the surprisingly tough Express. "The Express has a wide open offense," said defensive end Cliff Greenfield, "Tommy Reamon and Alfred Haywood have the great speed to get outside. We have to contain those sweeps."

"And with George Mira throwing, they have a strong passing offense," added linebacker Tom Chandler, "We have to keep the heat on him."

Charlotte did just that, forcing four turnovers and holding Jacksonville to just 54 yards in the first half. They harassed Mira into a 6 of 14 passing night before driving him from the game, and held Haywood and Reamon to a total of only 83 yards on the ground. The Hornets evened their record at 2-and-2 with a 33-14 thumping of Jacksonville.

The Hornets scored the very first time they had the ball on a one-yard plunge by Don Highsmith, who finished with 99 yards on the ground. Lewis Jolley, one of the local boys recruited by the team to help spur interest in the club, scored two touchdowns. Despite a steady rain, quarterback Tom Sherman hit on his first seven passing attempts and wound up completing 9 of 11 tosses for 119 yards. Most of the time, Sherman picked on the injury-depleted left side of the Express defense. "We went to the left and we were successful," Sherman said, "so we just continued that success."

"We got the football and we controlled it," said Bob Gibson, "The rains actually helped us because it could have been a different game if we hadn't scored before it rained."

On September 6th, Charlotte shut out Philadelphia, 10-0 but just 10,500 people—some reports put the figure closer to 8,500—showed up. It didn't help that the game, like so many the WFL played in 1975, was held in a driving rainstorm. Both clubs had trouble getting anything going offensively. Sherman hit on only 1 pass all day, and the two teams combined for four turnovers.

After the Hornets gained just 16 yards in the first half, Gibson said the team made adjustments to its game plan in the second half. "The footing was so bad inside that we decided to go outside," said the head coach, "Highsmith did great and it was a great job in a lot of adversity by Tom."

The new plan worked. After a scoreless first half, Highsmith, who finished with a game-high 101 yards rushing, capped a 90-yard 11-play drive with a 27-yard burst to the end zone.

Philadelphia threatened in the third quarter when the Hornets fumbled and defensive back Herb Lynch returned it to the Charlotte 21. But the Hornet defense stiffened and then the Bell missed a field goal try.

Punter Robby Reynolds also buried the Bell deep in their own end on a pair of coffin corner kicks, one that reached the one-yard line and the other which was downed at the four.

Pete Rajecki added his fifth field goal in five tries with a 37-yarder to set the final at 10-0. Linebacker Jere Brown sealed the shutout by intercepting a Philadelphia pass at his own two-yard line in the final seconds.

"People keep talking about what the Hornets don't have and what I don't have," said Highsmith after the game, "But I think we have a lot of talent and determination. If we keep playing well long enough, they'll get the message."

Highsmith, the WFL Player of the Week for his performance against Philadelphia, sent a message to his detractors with another good game a week later, scoring two touchdowns as the Hornets won again, 30-22, over Southern California in Anaheim. "I feel like I am as good as any running back in the league," said Highsmith, "And this year I am going all out to prove it." Charlotte erased a 22-15 fourth-quarter deficit to win their fourth game in a row.

"If you challenge the Sun offense, they can be stopped," said Gibson, after watching the Hornets intercept four passes and get two quarterback sacks, "Our pass defense did the job."

In the waning minutes, the Sun moved 65 yards to the Charlotte one-yard line. But the Hornets rose up and stuffed 240-pound fullback Greg Herd, and when an offside penalty gave Southern California another chance, Charlotte stopped Herd again just inches short of the goal line.

A week later, the Hornets took their four-game winning streak into Birmingham for a big Eastern Division showdown with the Vulcans. Charlotte, at 4-and-2, trailed Birmingham, 5-and-2, by half a game in the standings. The Hornets offense wasn't the most effective in the WFL, but at least they had learned how to hold onto the ball, as their 13 fumbles were the second fewest in the league.

The Vulcans took the opening kickoff and marched to the Charlotte six-yard line. But when Johnny Musso tried to go up the middle, the Hornets hit him hard and he fumbled. The ball squirted into the end zone where defensive back Sonny Hicks fell on it for a touchback.

The Hornets fell behind 7-0 when Birmingham scored on their next possession, but Sherman responded by

driving his club 68 yards in 11 plays. Highsmith capped the march with a two-yard touchdown. Sherman converted the action point with a pass to tight end Ray Parson and Charlotte led, 8-7.

In the third quarter, safety Jeff Woodcock stepped in front of a Matthew Reed pass and returned it 13 yards to the Birmingham 37. Sherman again maneuvered his troops down the field, and another 2-yard scoring run by Highsmith made it 16-7.

But the Hornets went to the well once too often. On the first play of the last quarter, Charlotte faced a fourth-and-one on the Birmingham 21. Sherman gave it to Highsmith, but this time the big fullback was stopped for no gain.

The play changed the complexion of the game. After Highsmith was stopped on the fourth down play, the Hornets were able to pick up only one first down the rest of the game. Birmingham seized the momentum and capitalized, driving 79 yards to move within 16-14. Later in the period, the Vulcans scored again to win it 22-16.

"We played well enough to win," said an obviously frustrated Bob Gibson, "We blew the game, and I had a lot to do with it. That's all I have to say on the subject." Gibson was alluding to the fact that he was hit with an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty when he slammed the ball to the turf while the referee explained a penalty to him. The penalty helped grind a potential Hornet drive to a halt. The loss snapped the Hornets' four-game winning streak.

A week later, on September 27th, the Hornets hosted Anthony Davis and Southern California in a rematch of their game of two weeks before. It was the only time all season that the Hornets were able to draw over 15,000 fans, as a total of 17,000 fans came out on a warm sunny afternoon to see one of the league's top draws. But they also saw the Hornets lose their second game in a row, 24-17 to the Sun as Davis had over 100 yards both rushing and receiving. The Hornets, meanwhile, sporting the league's worst offense, had trouble moving the ball. Don Highsmith was held to 36 yards rushing in 25 carries and the Sun intercepted five Charlotte passes. Sherman and Brian Dowling could complete only 13 of 28 attempts.

Despite the lack of fans and the subsequent lack of money, Upton Bell continued to work tirelessly in his efforts to promote the Hornets. He often worked 100-plus hours a week, either in his office or on the road in places like Chapel Hill, Greensboro and Raleigh, to keep pro football alive in the Carolinas. Sometimes without realizing it, he would try to call press conferences at 3 o'clock in the morning, forgetting he was the only person still up working at that hour.

"I don't think I'd ever want to do that again physically," Bell recalled a year later, adding that he lost about 23 pounds and saw his weight drop to 142 pounds during his efforts.

On October 4th, the Hornets rebounded to crush Shreveport, 39-14, on a beautiful sunny afternoon in Louisiana. Sherman also bounced back from his awful performance of a week before by hitting on 17 of 20 passes for 154 yards and two touchdowns to wide receiver Tim George. The defense blocked a field goal try and then a punt with just 43 seconds left, which J.T. Turner returned 10 yards for a touchdown. Randy Rhino picked off a D.C. Nobles pass and returned it 84 yards for another touchdown.

A week later, the Hornets came home to face Jacksonville. Only about a third of the seats in American Legion Stadium were occupied, as the game drew just 7,750 fans. Charlotte erupted for 19 second quarter points and went on to defeat the Express, 22-15. Ike Thomas returned a kickoff 92 yards for a touchdown, and minutes later, recovered a fumble that led to another touchdown.

A leaping circus catch by wide receiver Lee McGriff, signed in September, set up a 21-yard field goal by Pete Rajecki. The win was special for McGriff, who had been cut by Jacksonville. "All I wanted to do was play," said McGriff, "Although I made it until the next-to-last cut with Dallas, I played in only two exhibition games with the Express. I was really hurtin' for playing time."

After the game, Upton Bell's frustration with Charlotte boiled over. The owner was upset that a city which had welcomed his franchise so warmly in 1974 had seemingly turned its back on the club.

"If attendance doesn't improve," said Bell, "I am going to have a decision to make, whether to fold the team or move it." Before the season started, Bell said the team had to average 12,000 to break even. They were nowhere near that figure.

"I cannot continue to ask our players to constantly walk out onto the field and count the house," Bell stated, "I am not going to ask any of our players to take a cut in pay; I will fold the team first.

"It's simply black and white," Bell went on. "I want the team to remain here as long as it is a viable product. But we can't continue to operate on the attendance. The city of Charlotte has to decide whether it wants pro football or not."

With the crowds smaller than expected, and the cash flow slowing to a trickle, the Hornets were evicted from the local park where they practiced early in the season, because the owner claimed they owed him $1,500. Upton Bell said the payment was not due until there was an improvement to the park's conditions.

Attendance dropped off at an alarming rate from '74. In 1974, Charlotte drew an average of 22,128 fans to their four home games. But in 1975, the Hornets wound up drawing an average of just 10,880 people a game, a drop of more than 50 percent. Only Philadelphia and Portland were doing worse. It seemed that Saturday afternoon games were not a hit with fans in Charlotte.

Also, like most of the '75 franchises, the bad memories of '74—the missed payrolls, unpaid debts, inflated attendance figures and just overall poor management—caused a huge credibility gap the Hornets, like their league brethren, simply could not overcome.

Two days after Charlotte's loss to Jacksonville, a meeting, termed "critical" by members of the league hierarchy, was called in New York for league officials on the 13th of October. Several scenarios were discussed, but in the end, WFL officials decided to continue playing with all the league teams intact.

On Saturday the 18th, the Hornets lost to Philadelphia, 18-10 on a damp and rainy night in Franklin Field. The game was supposed to be broadcast back to Charlotte but because of an engineer's strike, the WRET TV36 and WGHP TV8 crews would not cross the picket lines. Both stations had to cancel their telecasts. It was probably just as well as the Hornets could manage only a minus 3 yards rushing in the first half.

Charlotte didn't get a first down by rushing until there were nine minutes left in the game when running back Sylvester "Molly" McGee broke off a 43-yard run to the Bell 4-yard line. Don Highsmith, who rushed 16 times for a minus 2 yards, scored on the next play but that was as close as the Hornets could get. Hornet quarterbacks Tom Sherman and Brian Dowling completed only 12 of 36 passes and had two throws picked off.

"We got no offense at all," said Bob Gibson, "When you can't move it at all, you've got to say it was a plenty poor performance. I don't think we blocked a soul, and they manhandled us on the offensive line. We didn't have complete concentration. When you get the ball in your bosom and drop it after cuddling the S.O.B. it's just a lack of concentration. The offense showed complete ineptness. It was our worst, overall performance of the season."

The defense intercepted Bob Davis three times, with Randy Rhino having one of the picks and adding thirteen tackles. But the offense, or more accurately lack thereof, sabotaged the team's efforts.

The team's play had been frustratingly inconsistent all season, as evidenced by their lackluster 6-and-5 record. Highsmith led the team in rushing with 550 yards and in scoring with 11 touchdowns, but averaged only 2.6 yards per carry. Quarterbacks Sherman and Dowling combined for 8 touchdowns and 15 interceptions. The team's leading receiver, James Thompson, caught only 19 passes. Only Birmingham gave up fewer points in the league, but only three teams scored fewer points than the Hornets.

Four days after their loss in Philadelphia, the Hornets were going through various drills at practice. Bob Gibson was called off the field to take a telephone call. It turned out to be from owner Upton Bell. Gibson rejoined the team and called them together.

"I looked in his face," said linebacker Jere Brown, "He was almost crying, and I knew what he would say."

"Go ahead and sit down," Gibson said, "This is going to be a long break." He then told the players that the league had folded.

"I honestly didn't think that it (the league folding) would come," Gibson told reporters. "I felt that the big money people in the league had too much at stake to let it happen. Bell relayed just the basic facts. He told me that the league was finished and that they'd decided to fold the league and that we weren't in favor of folding. We voted to continue. We were very desirous to continue the league and had the financial backing to do so.

"We just didn't have the kind of attendance to make it go," added Gibson, "I was first afraid we were in trouble when we had 7,000 for the Jacksonville game (on October 12th). We didn't get the support."

Upton Bell would not say that the lack of a major TV contract was to blame for the failure of the league, but he did say that a contract with a major network would have been needed in the future for the league to ultimately survive.

"I can't live week by week or day by day," said Bell, "It was a matter of when would it come to the point that it was perfectly ridiculous."

The WFL was now history. Quite a few opinions were presented to explain the demise of the league. But many people felt that one of the reasons was that, in a lot of ways, thanks to their own mismanagement and shortsightedness, the Wiffle had already reached the point of being perfectly ridiculous.

CHAPTER 23

A Lot of Hot Air

The Chicago Winds, 1975

"It was George and Rich from California. I don't know their last names, but one's an Arab and the other's a Greek."

—FRANK MARIANI, Chicago Winds' vice president of football operations, when asked the names of the investors who had left the team

Without a team in New York, the 1975 WFL needed a franchise in America's Number Two media market, Chicago. But Tom Origer, who had run the Fire in 1974, was gone, having thrown up his arms in exasperation and thrown in the towel.

So for the new '75 season, the old franchise was resuscitated and renamed the Winds. New investors included a young energetic insurance man named Eugene Pullano, and Dominic DiMatteo, owner of the Dominic Store chain. The Winds' vice-president in charge of football operations, Frank Mariani, boasted at the time about "how beautifully organized" the Winds were as compared to the Fire. Like his football team would ultimately become, Mariani was full of a lot of hot air.

Wiffle President Chris Hemmeter was bound and determined to make Chicago a flagship franchise in the league. Hopes were high since the Fire had been a solid draw in 1974, averaging almost 29,000 fans a game.

Hemmeter and Pullano contacted John Bassett in Memphis and asked if he would be willing to transfer the contracts of Larry Csonka, Jim Kiick and Paul Warfield to Chicago to be the cornerstones of what they felt was an integral market for the league's ultimate survival. After a series of meetings, however, Bassett decided that "The Big Three" belonged in Memphis.

Pullano announced he had been having meetings with former Kansas City Chiefs' coach Hank Stram to discuss the possibility of him coaching the Winds. Stram had turned down the Houston job in 1974, and he turned Chicago down in 1975.

While the Fire had sold 15,000 season tickets in 1974, the Winds, thanks to the league's poor reputation and the uncertainty of the franchise itself, managed to peddle only 1,600, which added up to only $80,000 in revenue. Not a good sign.

Late in the 1974 season, Birmingham running back Charley Harraway had been asked what the WFL could do to succeed. "There's only one thing that could have saved the World Football League," Harraway said, "and that was Joe Namath."

Someone took Harraway seriously. In mid-April, word leaked out that the Chicago franchise was trying to sign the Jets quarterback to a long term contract. Namath was wavering about re-signing with the Jets after the 1974 season. Reports had him retiring, being traded to another NFL team, or jumping to the WFL, perhaps as a player / coach / co-owner.

Gene Pullano made Namath an offer, and the reports of the proposal quoted in many news outlets were staggering: $500,000 upon signing, $500,000 for the next three years and $100,000 yearly for twenty years. After playing a year or more, Namath would also be offered half of any WFL franchise placed in the city of New York.

"I think this is the most historic day in the WFL's history. We've been building a launching pad that we knew was strong, and this marks the successful firing and liftoff of this league," Hemmeter said.

Two weeks later, the WFL sweetened the pot for Broadway Joe. Hemmeter announced that the WFL would present Namath's attorney with a certified check for $500,000 to lure the NFL star to the WFL. The team also agreed to change the team's uniforms to green and white to mirror those of Namath's Jets. Namath's compadre and former back-up on the Super

Bowl-winning Jets, Babe Parilli, was hired as head coach and General Manager.

"Frank Mariani," Parilli responded when asked who contacted him about the Winds' job, "I went out there and thought I had a good contract, a three year contract, in Chicago."

Meanwhile, a lot of league officials held their breath waiting to see if Namath would sign with Chicago. If he did, it could make the league. If not . . .

"I want to play football, and I'll play with Chicago if things work out," said Namath, "The people in the WFL have about got me convinced it's going to work. I hope the league does survive, because it creates more jobs and entertainment. There are a lot of fine players who don't have the opportunity to play now."

Broadway Joe said the Winds offer was "more than fair," and added that he still didn't know which way he'd go. "It's an interesting contract," Joe told the press after one of his meetings with Pullano, "I'm pleased that they're interested, and I hope it works out."

Meanwhile, Jets' owner Phil Iselin offered Namath a 3-year, $1-million deal on a "take it or leave it" basis.

"It's up to him," said Iselin, who was definitely trying to play hardball, "We would like to have him back, but if he doesn't sign with us, we're not going out of business."

But Iselin knew the WFL didn't have the luxury of Namath not signing with them.

Hemmeter announced that the 40-page contract was virtually complete, but that Namath wanted some additional things that represented both substantial money and substantial performance. He did not elaborate.

"It's possible to stay in football after I quit playing," Namath said, adding that wherever he goes, without further injuries to his fragile knees, he could play "at least three more years in good style."

According to Mark Kreigel's biography, *Namath*, Chicago apparently accepted the terms of the contract —until Jimmy Walsh, Namath's agent, also demanded 15 percent of the WFL's total TV package. The Winds, acting somewhat shortsightedly—since 85% of a television contract would have been better than no TV contract at all—rejected the deal.

On May 22nd, Namath announced that the deal was off.

"I feel badly about not signing," said Namath, who was not going to be referred to as 'Windy City Joe' after all, "Everybody was excited about it."

"I tell you," said Walsh, "it cost me an easy $2 million. But I can understand Joe's decision—and it was his alone."

Jets' President Phil Iselin threw some salt in the Wiffle's wound when he said, "The WFL has to get uniforms first."

When Eddie Einhorn, head of the WFL's television partner, the TVS television network, got word that the upstart league was going after Namath, he bluntly told league president Chris Hemmeter that the WFL was literally betting its existence on getting Namath. Nearly all of TVS' affiliates refused to commit to air any WFL games in 1975 until Namath's signing was confirmed. The Winds had all but promised that Namath would come to Chicago, and their failure to sign him made them and the league look foolish. In the end, Namath stayed with the Jets, TVS dropped its coverage of the WFL, and the league was left without national television coverage, a sure kiss of death in the world of sports.

The failure to sign Broadway Joe was a crippling blow to the franchise. Season ticket sales after the announcement were virtually nonexistent. With Namath out of the picture, the Winds tried to sign rookie Tom Clements from Notre Dame, but he chose to ink a deal with the CFL instead. The team then acquired veteran NFL journeyman quarterback Pete Beathard from the Portland Storm, and while Beathard was a decent enough quarterback, he certainly did not have the drawing power of a Broadway Joe (who did?).

Birmingham GM Jack Gotta thought that the NFL might have secretly entered the Namath picture after the Jets lost college superstar Anthony Davis to the Wiffle's Southern California Sun. "Davis is a star of the future and the Jets lost him," said Gotta, "If they had lost Namath, too, it could have ruined them at the gate. It's just my opinion, but the NFL may have jumped in there screaming for the Jets to keep Namath in New York at all costs."

In another effort to help the floundering franchise, Chris Hemmeter had The Hawaiians send John Gilliam to Chicago. The Winds' owners sent cash to Honolulu for Gilliam, who also demanded extra money for making the move to Chicago.

The Winds also made a stab at signing a rookie running back from Jackson State. His name? Walter Payton, who just happened to be the Number One draft choice of the rival Bears. Gene Pullano asked Chris Hemmeter to help him recruit Payton. "Pullano called and said, 'I've got this kid coming out of Jackson State and I'd love to sign him into the World Football League,'" remembered Hemmeter, "would you come down here and help me recruit him?'" The two met with Payton for a couple hours. According to Jeff Pearlman's book, *Sweetness*, Pullano took Payton and his representative, Bud Holmes, to dinner and literally

offered the world. Pullano told Payton that if he joined the Winds, he'd pay him $150,000 a year, plus rent him an apartment, throw in a Cadillac, and promised him that the team would sign his college teammate, Rickey Young, to be his blocking back. "This guy had a great big bear ring that had two ruby eyes," Holmes said in *Sweetness*, "Well, during dinner he took it off his finger and handed it to Walter. Just gave it to him."

Payton was very tempted by the offer. The money and perks were very generous. But Payton really preferred playing in the NFL, and he wound up signing with the cross-town Bears.

One can only wonder how football history might have been different if the Winds had been able to field a team that included Namath, Payton and Gilliam. But the history of the WFL was full of 'What Ifs?'

The preseason did nothing to dispel the problems the team was facing. "One game in Soldier Field against the Jacksonville Express we had lightning bolts coming down on us," recalled Parilli, "It was pouring rain, and I think there were one or two thousand fans running for cover. We lost the game; we didn't have much of a team. The conditions that night were unbelievable. It was scary. I thought to myself, 'someone's gonna get killed out there.'"

Hemmeter continued his efforts to make the Winds a viable and successful franchise. It was obvious that he was betting the house on having a good team in Chicago. On July 27th, the Winds hired GM Leo Cahill away from Memphis. Cahill, who took the job at the urging of Hemmeter, would not only be the General Manager, but was given complete control over the operation of the franchise, as well.

"We're going to turn this thing around, and we'll get a good football team here in Chicago," pledged Cahill.

Unfortunately, that team wasn't the Winds.

"We wanted to get the Number One General Manager in the league to study the problems in Chicago," said Hemmeter. The Winds had sold only 2,000 season tickets, and Hemmeter, determined to make Chicago a flagship franchise, thought Cahill was the right man for the job of stabilizing the situation.

That stabilization came into question on Cahill's first day on the job, when the Winds announced that Babe Parilli was being dismissed as head coach and that former Bears' coach Abe Gibron was replacing him. The Winds must have figured they didn't need Parilli around anymore since they'd lost Namath. Parilli immediately claimed that his contract had been "for life" and threatened legal action.

"Abe Gibron, who was a local hero with the Bears, got fired, and management couldn't get fans in the stands, so they called me in and told me they were going to hire Abe," recalled Parilli, "I said, 'Wait a minute. I got a three year contract.' They said they would honor it, but they never did. Later I sued the Winds, and won, but I never got the money because the team and league had folded."

Gibron had been named to four Pro Bowls and the 1952 All Pro team and was best known for his quick and agile charge off the ball. After he got into coaching, he became known for his quick and agile wit. A typical Gibron quote concerned Bears scatter armed quarterback Bobby Douglass, a big rangy signal-caller whose productivity never quite matched the expectations for him. In Abe's words, "He could throw a football through a brick wall, if only he could hit a brick wall."

Of course, this being the WFL, news of Gibron's hiring couldn't go off without a hitch of some kind. When the *New York Times* printed the story announcing Gibron's hiring, a typo in the story indicated that Gibron had become coach of the Chicago *Winos*.

From his comments, it would seem that Parilli was less than heartbroken when he was let go by the Winds. "By then all the major talent had gone," Parilli recalled, "The guys like Jack Dolbin, Virgil Carter, and so on. We had an inferior team. Mark Kellar was probably the best player the Chicago Winds had that year. I don't think there was any mystery why the fans weren't coming to see the team, but the owners couldn't understand that. They hired Abe Gibron, hoping to get some fans in, but they struggled. I don't think they had the money. We had one owner, Dominic DiMatteo, of Dominic Stores, who probably could've bank rolled the whole thing but he was a minority investor. As far as the other guys, I think they were just there for their ego."

Gibron was a Redskins assistant coach from 1960 through 1964 under their head coach Bill McPeak and returned to the Bears in the same capacity in 1965, working first under George Halas and then Jim Dooley until 1971. Gibron was then named the Chicago Bears Head Coach from 1972 through '74. After compiling an 11-30-1 record, Gibron was canned.

"I'm back in football and I'm glad to be back," said Gibron, "It's been my life for 27 years. I can only promise it will be an aggressive team both physically and mentally."

Gibron had only 48 hours or so to learn about his new team before they would open their season. He also found himself shorthanded in the coaching staff department when Stew Barber, Dave Brazil and Burley Crowe all left with Parilli. Gibron brought his former Redskins boss Bill McPeak in with him, and

Joe Popp stayed on board as the lone holdover from Parilli's staff. The Winds would have to go into their opener with a three-man coaching staff.

Equipment man Mike "Tiger" Ferraro opted to stay and finish the season with the Winds, not realizing how short that stay would ultimately be.

Pullano signed Kellar and Beathard, and added Gilliam in June. He also added Gary Danielson to backup Beathard. Margene Adkins was expected to complement Gilliam at the other flank. Eagle and Chicago Fire retread Cyril Pinder was to team with Kellar in the backfield but the offensive line was not going to be a strong point. The only solid lineman was Mike Wilson, but he was your typical WFL player, a guy who was multi-talented and could play a number of positions well enough to earn a living doing it but not quite up to the NFL level.

Defensively, the WFL fans in Chicago remembered the disaster the Fire defense had become in 1974. With former Fire defensive players Chuck Bailey and Ken Sanduk at tackles, Mick Heinrich at end, Chuck Kogut at linebacker, Hal Phillips at the corner, and Ralph "Sticks" Anderson and Harry Howard at the safety positions, the Winds put a defense on the field that seemed little improved from the league's worst unit of 1974.

The Winds opened their season on the road in Birmingham. "I expect the game to be high-scoring," Gibron said before the game. He couldn't have been more wrong. The Winds' defense actually played fairly well, but Chicago's offense was just plain offensive as it managed only 205 total yards and was unable to take advantage of 5 turnovers. Beathard completed only 4 of 19 passes for a paltry 35 yards and threw two interceptions before giving way to Gary Danielson. Mark Kellar was held to 48 yards rushing in 14 carries and also fumbled twice. Allen Watson, the Scotsman picked up from the minor leagues by the Fire in 1974, misfired on three field goal tries. Chicago lost, 10-0. Whatever could go wrong, did go wrong for the Winds in Birmingham.

The team travelled to Shreveport next, and while the offense did better, it wasn't enough as the Winds lost their second straight, 38-18.

John Gilliam, held in check in Birmingham, broke out with the kind of game expected of him, catching 6 passes for 98 yards. "It's been an easy adjustment in Chicago," said Gilliam, "I love this place because it's football crazy and just a swinging city. But, we've got to win games and if we can, there's no doubt the city will support us."

Gilliam was quick to credit Beathard, his old Cardinals' teammate, who made up for his terrible performance of the week before by completing 22 of 42 passes for 294 yards and three touchdowns.

"Pete knows defenses and what to do on third down situations," said Gilliam, "Once we get our system down, we'll be great. There is really no difference in the type of coverages used in the WFL and the NFL. I was faced with double coverage last year and I'm seeing it about the same number of times this year.

"There are a lot of young defensive backs in this league," Gilliam continued, "but playing against me, Warfield, Kwalick and Margene (Adkins), they will get experienced in a hurry."

Despite Gilliam's confidence, the Winds still had their problems. Beathard did throw three interceptions, one of them returned 77 yards by Melvin Daniels for a touchdown in the fourth quarter. The rushing attack struggled again, as Kellar had 54 yards but the rest of the team managed only 42 more. Watson missed two of three field goal attempts, making him 1 out of 6 for the season and spelling the end of his career in Chicago. By midweek, he was back in Pennsylvania working as a sales rep with the company in Midland. He was replaced as kicker by Randy Haddox.

After the two road losses to open the year, the Winds returned to Chicago on August 16th, 1975 to play the Portland Thunder. The team was getting precious little coverage or support in the local papers, the *Tribune* and the *Sun-Times*, and fan support seemed almost nonexistent. The Winds were sure that Gibron could be an attraction all by himself, due to his popularity in and around the Chicago area. The team decided to dedicate their first home game to the coach and billed the game as "Welcome Back Abe Night." To help promote the event, the team announced that any and all children accompanied by an adult would get in for only $1.00. The first 5,000 children would get a free Winds t-shirt.

But the Windy City didn't seem all that enthusiastic about welcoming Gibron back. Nor did they seem all that crazy about seeing the Winds. Only 3,470 Chicagoans showed up at Soldier Field in the rain. Needless to say, a lot of free t-shirts were still in their boxes. While the Fire may not have been as "beautifully organized" as the Winds, at least they drew decent crowds in 1974. Playing in front of 52,000 empty seats had to be an embarrassment.

The few people that bothered to show up actually saw a good game. The contest was an exciting one and it produced the only victory the Winds would enjoy in their brief history. Chicago jumped out to an 11-0 first quarter lead on a 20-yard field goal by the newcomer Haddox and a touchdown pass from Beathard

to Gilliam. Portland scored to draw within 11-7, but a one-yard run by Kellar put Chicago ahead, 18-7. The Winds defense could not contain Portland, however, as the Thunder rolled up 230 yards on the ground and quarterback Don Horn called a conservative but efficient game. Portland came back to tie it at 18 and the two teams were still tied at the end of regulation. The game moved into a sudden death overtime period. Winds' linebacker Chuck Kogut, a holdover from the beleaguered Fire defense of '74, turned the momentum Chicago's way in overtime with an interception of Horn. Beathard then hit Gilliam with a 28-yard scoring strike to give the Winds a 25-18 victory.

"We made some mistakes out there, but the guys played like hell," said Gibron, "You got to start somewhere."

But the team couldn't sustain its momentum and followed up their win with two more losses on the road.

In Honolulu, the Winds, who it seemed had played every one of their home games in a downpour, were finally able to get in out of the rain. But that was the only good thing one could say about the game. The Winds bolted to a 17-3 lead but couldn't hold off the hard charging Hawaiians. Chicago gained only 70 yards on the ground and Pete Beathard completed only 9 of 24 passes before being lifted for Gary Danielson. The Winds' porous defense couldn't stop Sonny Sixkiller, who threw for three touchdowns, two of them in the last quarter, or Clayton Heath, who rushed for 120 yards. Chicago lost, 28-17, their third setback in four starts.

On August 26th, Gibron, frustrated by his team's play, cut four starters, the regular placekicker and the regular punter. Gone in the sweep were middle linebacker Chester Pleasant, defensive back Willie Roberts, offensive guard Dave Malheiro, tight end Jim Gessford, place kicker Randy Haddox, punter Jim Gilbert and defensive end Art May. He then signed defensive end Allen Aldridge and kicker / punter Earl Sark. A day later, the roster moves continued. Gibron cut offensive tackle Steve Wright, and signed linebacker Van DeCree, defensive end Mark Ilgenfritz and quarterback Roussell Williams. On the 28th, Gibron added offensive tackle Tom Forrest.

None of the moves helped. On August 30th in Memphis, the Winds were crushed 31-7 by the Grizzlies. Memphis rolled up 26 first downs and 421 yards in total offense. Pete Beathard completed 20 of 27 passes but they were mostly short dump offs to his backs that gained a total of only 165 yards. John Gilliam was shut out. Earl Sark, the third placekicker Gibron had tried, had a 22 yard field goal try blocked. The running attack consisted of Bob Wyatt's 61 yards and one touchdown and not much else.

"With Csonka and Kiick in there, you know what to do," grumbled Gibron, "but who expected those other guys to run like hell?" Abe was referring to Willie Spencer, who had a game-high 65 yards, and Danny White, who ran 4 times for 33 yards.

It's the Big W I tell ya, it's the Big W!!!

When the Winds put out their media guide and other preseason communications, their helmets were supposed to have an imaginative "W" on the side which was overlaid on a green football shaped design. Instead, the Winds played their two preseason games and first four league games with a plain "W" on the side. This nondescript design looked fairly lame when compared to the logo that was originally projected. It certainly looked like the team had not put a lot of thought into the helmet logo. The team did not wear the more stylistic "W" design until their last game against Memphis.

With the team 1-and-4, a dispute over partnership arrangements arose in the Winds' camp. Two of Pullano's major investors withdrew $175,000 that they'd deposited with the league and that was supposed to be in escrow to cover team expenses. Who these two guys were was never quite clear. William Oscar Johnson's eulogy for the World Football League in the December 1st, 1975 issue of *Sports Illustrated* offered this explanation. Johnson quoted Winds' Vice President of Football Operations Frank Mariani on the issue of the runaway investors: "It was George and Rich from California," Mariani reportedly said, "I don't know their last names, but one's an Arab and the other's a Greek."

The investors' withdrawal dropped the Winds below the league's capitalization requirements. Pullano asked for time to find more investors. The WFL owners, still smarting from the financial debacle of 1974 when they tried to prop up the weaker teams in the league, voted 10-to-1 on September 2nd to expel Chicago from the league. The only franchise to vote in favor of the team continuing: the Winds.

Discussions were held about making the Winds some kind of a road team but that idea was rejected as being too costly (and more than a little foolish).

The Winds, meanwhile, countered that the league had acted "hastily and without foundation," in the

words of team attorney Kenneth Zak, in revoking the franchise.

Zak, who represented the Winds at the meeting on the 2nd, said the club did not have adequate time "to prepare our side of the argument," and that the WFL's decision besmirched the good name of Chicago's investors.

"The true facts are that the Chicago investors have completely fulfilled their commitments to the league," Zak stated, "by the investment of the total monies pledged to them. The team had not defaulted at the time the action was taken."

Zak also countered by saying that the two investors who had withdrawn their money were not actually a part of the Chicago investment group, but had been added by the league itself to help fund the team.

Zak went on to say that the remaining Chicago investors would pursue negotiations with Hemmeter in an effort to "remain in this thing," or even recoup some of their money. He said the franchise would probably not sue the Wiffle for damages, adding that "we can work this thing out."

They never did work things out, and the Winds had blown out of town. When news came down that the team had been booted out of the league, running back Mark Kellar said, "I thought this season would be different, really I did." But it wasn't.

"They told us one day before practice," said Kellar, "Gene Pullano and Abe Gibron were there and they said that the team was done and the league would be assigning our contracts to other teams. We were told that the next day we would find out where we would be going. There was a lot of suspicion about how the team was doing, so it came as no surprise. I really put 1975 out of my mind." So did a lot of other people involved in the '75 Wiffle.

By this time the WFL had become an old hand at reacting to teams folding in mid-season, so they were prepared when the Winds blew out of town. The league agreed to distribute the Winds' players among the remaining franchises by way of a dispersal draft. The Winds' game against the Southern California Sun scheduled for September 6th was canceled. When the league opened the season with 11 teams, one team had a bye each week; with Chicago now out, the bye team simply took the Winds' place in the schedule.

However, the folding of the Winds would most certainly put a considerable financial strain on the remaining franchises, as they were required to repay any debts the Winds had incurred.

Meanwhile, John Gilliam was selected by the Philadelphia Bell in a dispersal draft, but decided he'd had quite enough of the WFL and returned to the NFL Minnesota Vikings instead, much to the WFL's chagrin.

"This just makes me mad," said Hemmeter, "Here is a man (Gilliam) who accepted over $190,000 in money." This figure included a $150,000 signing bonus for jumping to The Hawaiians in 1974, $25,000 for the trouble of moving him from Hawaii to Chicago, payment for 20 round trip tickets to Hawaii, a high-priced car and other assorted contractual benefits.

"The NFL's defense in its action of re-signing Gilliam is a clause in his contract with the Winds that in the case the franchise was voided, he would be free," continued Hemmeter, "But, in fact, the bylaws of the WFL state that when he signed a contract with the WFL, he is under contract to the WFL.

"We made our feelings known that it is imperative that Gilliam remain in the WFL," Hemmeter went on, "Now since he has signed with the Vikings we want to make it known that we are going to do all within our power to protect our league. We are not going to back down from an aggressive approach."

Hemmeter added that he was personally tired "of putting up with anymore crap" from the NFL.

The Chicago Winds, instead of being one of the model franchises of the New WFL, was the first in this house of cards to collapse. The flagship had sunk.

The other ten franchises moved forward but the writing was on the wall. The Wiffle had failed in New York and now in Chicago. The league wouldn't last another two months.

Pete Beathard and Larry Jameson tried to sue the Mid-City Bank and Pullano and Mariani for their salaries. Beathard claimed he was owed $50,555.55, while Jameson said he was owed $19,440. When the club folded, Beathard and Jameson presented drafts under their letters of credit to the bank. The two were informed by the bank that their letters of credit had been revoked.

On August 30th, 1976, the court ruled in favor of the bank.

Mark Kellar had a bit more luck than Beathard and Jameson. "We filed a lawsuit against the World Football league, Gene Pullano, and the Chicago Winds, and the bank in Chicago," said Kellar, "I think in February of 1977 I got something finally. They owed me about $50,000. The judgment came in my favor, and they didn't have it. They offered $34,000 and I took it. I think I got $20,000 by the time it was all over."

CHAPTER 24

Lei'd Off . . . Part II

The Hawaiians, 1975

"We stayed at a resort for training camp, (but) our practice field was an old archery range that tilted. You'd line up in the I-Formation, and might be looking uphill."

—CALVIN HILL, running back, The Hawaiians

Hawaii has always been a paradise. It's a popular destination for vacations, weddings, and getaways. Luaus, hula girls, pristine beaches, gorgeous weather. Hawaii has everything one could want in a paradise.

For The Hawaiians and the WFL, however, Hawaii was nowhere near what you'd call a paradise. Fans avoided the team in droves, first in the ancient "Termite Palace," Honolulu Stadium, and then at Aloha Stadium. Only once in two seasons did the team draw as many as 20,000 people to a game. Fans complained that the ticket prices were too high (They were). Fans complained that the team was not very good (It wasn't). At first the team scheduled games on Sundays. That didn't work. Then they moved them to midweek. That didn't work either. Then they moved them back to Sundays. That still didn't work.

Although the team had done well on the field in '74, making the playoffs and winning one playoff game, off the field the story was somewhat different.

Financially, the team had barely survived the season. Although the team had one of the strongest ownership groups in Chris Hemmeter and Sam Battistone, the high cost of travelling back and forth to the mainland and the cost of extended accommodation stays in the States had drained the team's finances. By the end of the season, the team had lost an incredible $3.2 million, about three times what the ownership group had budgeted for.

Prospects did not look good for the '75 season, if there was to be one. Hemmeter had left when he was named president of the WFL. Sam Battistone had moved to Anaheim to become an investor in the Sun. Who would pay the bills in 1975?

Jewel merchant Edward Sultan, Jr., who had been a minority stockholder in the team in '74, stepped forward and took over as principle owner of the franchise. He hired David Stringer, an architect and another of the '74 limited partners, as GM, and George Najarian as the Director of Player Personnel. Mike Giddings was re-hired as head coach, and he retained several members of his staff from '74. In a way to save money, however, Giddings announced that John Wilbur, Chuck Detwiler and Adrian Young would be player-coaches for the team. Wilbur also became a part-owner in the team, becoming only the second man in pro football history since George Halas to be a player, coach and owner of a team.

The team looked for other ways to save cash. It was decided that the club couldn't afford to hire an experienced trainer for 1975, so they took on George Kamau, an ambulance driver, who knew nothing about the job but said he was willing to learn.

There was uncertainty as far as the team personnel went, too. Quarterback Randy Johnson, who had joined the team during the '74 season and sparked them into the playoffs, had jumped back to the NFL. The team's leading rusher in '74, Ernie O'Leary, was injured and would not play at all in '75. Defensive tackle Ron East, leader of "East's Beasts," the defensive line that had performed so well in '74, was gone, as was his linemate, Greg Wojcik. Wide receiver John Gilliam and tight end Ted Kwalick, both of whom had signed future contracts with the team in 1974, were sent to Chicago and Philadelphia, respectively, by the league in an effort to help shore up the franchises there. The Hawaiians received an undisclosed amount of cash

from Bell owner John Bosacco and $100,000 from Winds owner Gene Pullano. Hemmeter stated that the presence of these players in their new cities might help spur ticket sales. While the cash helped The Hawaiians for the time being, losing all those players didn't.

Neither did eventually losing top-notch players like running back Calvin Hill, tight end John Kelsey, wide receiver Grady Richardson, and linebacker Frank Johnson, who all suffered injuries during the season that required surgery and knocked them out for most of the campaign. These injuries cut into what little depth the team had and the club would wind up struggling all season.

The franchise was also hurt by the fact that although they were supposed to move into brand-new Aloha Stadium at the beginning of the season, construction issues delayed the opening of the new facility. Rumors circulated that someone had put a curse on the new stadium because it was built on ancient burial grounds. Supposedly, a couple workers died, and a shaman had to come in and perform a ceremony to lift the curse. Too bad they couldn't throw one in for the snake bit team. The Hawaiians seemed to be cursed as well since they were stuck playing the first few games of their season at Honolulu Stadium, the old "Termite Palace."

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the team and the league as a whole, The Hawaiians were able to re-sign quite a few of their players for the '75 season. But the roster lacked depth and a rash of injuries would expose this weakness as the season progressed. Returning on offense were wide receivers Tim Delaney, who led the WFL in receptions in '74, and Tim Boyer; offensive linemen John Wilbur, Cornelius Johnson, and Jim Cadile; and running backs Vin Clements and Albert Davis. On defense, Karl Lorch, Levi Stanley, Lem Burnham and Richard Watkins, four members of the "East's Beasts" defensive line, were back, as were linebackers Dave Olerich and Jim Sniadecki. Returning in the defensive backfield were Phil Andre, Chuck Detwiler, John Moseley, Hal Stringert, Derrick Williams and Willie Williams, who had tied Sniadecki for the team lead with 5 interceptions in 1974.

Added from elsewhere were wide receiver Hubie Bryant from Florida, and quarterbacks Sonny Sixkiller from the Bell and Rick Cassata from the CFL. Rookies Rick Baska (linebacker) and Chris Pane (defensive back) made the squad.

On July 10th, The Hawaiians signed another veteran when they inked former Packers center Ken Bowman to a contract.

Bowman, who had played center for the Packers for a decade, was going to finish his career playing in a place that was the polar opposite of his experience in Green Bay.

Officially, Bowman had missed the 1974 NFL season due to a back ailment and was given a clean bill of health to play the 1975 WFL season. But Bowman recalled that unofficially the back injury did not exist and that he was let go by the Packers because of the '74 players' strike. Bowman, as vice president of the NFLPA, was one of the union's more vocal leaders, and had the audacity to picket at the hallowed ground of Lambeau Field in 1974.

"I got arrested," Bowman remembered. "I guess I overstayed my welcome under [*Packers' head coach*] Dan Devine. I was placed on injured reserve with a phantom back injury and sat out that year."

"In those days, you got cut if you were player rep," Packer teammate Bill Lueck said. "People don't realize how brutal the politics could be. If you got on the wrong side of certain people, you would not get picked up by other teams because you were labeled as a troublemaker."

What were Bowman's feelings on Devine? "Over his head," Bowman answered concisely, but he quickly added: "If you're going to banish me from Green Bay and the NFL, banish me to Hawaii. I had a lot of fun out there."

"I played 10 games before the league folded," Bowman recalled. "They were really crazy about their football in Hawaii and had a nice stadium."

Bowman said he came full circle in his football career when he played the 1975 season with Honolulu.

"When you start out in high school, you play for the fun and love of the game," Bowman explained. "In college, you're playing for your scholarship. Then you go into pro ball and play for Coach Lombardi and that's a pressure cooker.

"Being in Honolulu, playing football was fun again. I think I played for $750 a game. The pressure was off."

Bowman said he loved everything about playing in Honolulu: the sweltering practices on palm tree-lined high school fields; the red-eye flights to Los Angeles for multiple game road trips in the states; and especially the postgame beers at the Golden Coin bar.

The Hawaiians held training camp at a resort that turned out to be an interesting setting. Quarterback Sonny Sixkiller, one of the great names in pro football history, started his career as an amateur golfer during The Hawaiians '75 camp. Sixkiller would go on to raise thousands of dollars by participating in charity events.

"The camp was at a resort that had a golf course," recalled Sixkiller, "Some of the NFL veterans on the team never traveled anywhere without their golf clubs. We'd go out on days off and harass the course with all these linemen who had never played. The veterans were the golf coaches. Part of the fun was riding in golf carts with big linemen who had never played golf. It was a real hair-raising experience."

"There was a sense of being on the cutting edge in the World Football League," said Calvin Hill, now a consultant for the Cowboys' players program. "Everything was either great . . . or different. We stayed at a resort for training camp, (but) our practice field was an old archery range that tilted. You'd line up in the I-Formation, and might be looking uphill."

"I'm used to looking like a football player"

While The Hawaiians were going through the rigors of training camp, one of their old teammates was going through his own battle. Ray Hester, a linebacker with The Hawaiians in 1974, was fighting more than an offensive lineman in the heat. He was fighting Hodgkin's lymphoma. "I've thought the whole thing through," Hester told Peter Finney for an article in *Pro Football Weekly*, "After you come to the realization you may die, and face up to it, you put yourself in the right mental frame of mind. At least I have." Hester's description of the treatment ahead for him was short and sweet. "It's a bummer," he told Finney, who wrote that the three months ahead for Hester included injections and cobalt radiation. "I've lost my taste," Hester told him, "and I guess that's because of the drugs I'm on. But I've also lost the feeling in my fingertips. I don't know what's causing that." Doctors removed Hester's spleen in July, and they discovered he was in the third stage of Hodgkin's. "The neck is the first stage, then the chest, then the lower part of the stomach," Hester told Finney, "The only place it hadn't gone was the bone marrow. That's stage four." Hester had lost 35 pounds from his playing weight, and was around 180 pounds. "People keep telling me how good I look," Hester said, "Well, maybe I look good to them, but I'm used to looking like a football player." Hester said he had the best season of his career with The Hawaiians in '74. "I started out as one of a dozen linebackers and then went on to watch guys come and go through, it seemed like, a revolving door. By the end of the season I had become a starter." In his mind, Hester was still a starter. "I'm not thinking about dying," he told Finney, "I'm thinking about living."

Hill, who left the Cowboys after six seasons to play for The Hawaiians, was one of the lucky ones. He cashed every WFL paycheck owed to him because his lawyer drew up a contract with an irrevocable letter of credit built into it. Hill said that he "made more money in that one year in Hawaii than I did in my 12 years combined in the NFL."

That, however, did not stop Hill from filing a $700,000 federal damage suit against the Bank of Honolulu charging it had wrongfully withheld some weekly salary payments.

Hill was challenging a clause in his contract that said if a player was unable to play because of an injury, he would be employed by the team in a non-player capacity at one-half his playing salary.

The Bank continued to pay Hill his regular $5,000-a-week salary until September 20th when the club instructed the bank to cut Hill's $166,000 salary according to the terms of the contract. Bank president Frank Cooper, one of the investors in the club, decided to suspend Hill's salary payments until the alleged overpayments could be made up, after which the bank would then follow the contract clause.

Hill contended that his agreement with the bank was not conditioned upon the terms of his contract. Hill's suit claimed the bank violated state law which required the bank to get Hill's consent before altering the agreement.

Hill made his debut against Charlotte in the exhibition season opener, and it was a promising one, as he rushed for 46 yards in only 10 carries and also caught 3 passes for another 49 yards. Hill also scored a touchdown as The Hawaiians stomped the Hornets, 32-14.

Two weeks later, in a thunderstorm that dumped three inches of rain on the field and flooded the sidelines, The Hawaiians lost 19-7 in Jacksonville. Hill rushed only twice in the first quarter, but gained 26 yards.

After the game, the players were showering when the storm knocked out the electricity in their locker room. The players calmly assumed this was merely a cost-saving measure by the league, and Giddings quietly ordered the team's bus driver to pull up to the locker room windows and shine the headlights through them so the team could finish dressing.

The Hawaiians opened their 1975 season in Philadelphia. The game was played in 94-degree heat with only 2,732 fans on hand in Franklin Field.

Rick Cassata threw a touchdown pass but also tossed three interceptions and completed only 7 of 19 passes. The Hawaiians had a scoring chance ended by an interception in the end zone.

Hill gained 155 yards on the ground, but came up a yard short when he needed two on a fourth down with 1:45 left.

Still, The Hawaiians hung tough, trailing by only 21-15 with time running out. In desperation, Sixkiller threw a last-ditch pass to Hubie Bryant from his own 42. Just as Bryant went up for the ball at the 20, he was hit and the Bell was called for interference. Since a game cannot end on a defensive penalty, The Hawaiians had one more shot.

"What're you gonna do then?" Sixkiller asked, "You go for broke. I've been in these things before—beat Purdue with a long pass in the last two minutes my junior year at Washington. But I've never lost one of 'em before."

Given a reprieve, Sixkiller dropped back from the 20, but was hit hard and fumbled. Game over, right? Not just yet, for another flag had been dropped to the searing Franklin Field turf. This time the Bell was called for being offside.

Sixkiller and The Hawaiians tried it again, this time from the 15. This time, Sixkiller hit Tim Delaney just inside the end zone for the touchdown. Or was it? Once again, another penalty flag fluttered to the ground. This time offensive tackle Bob Richards was called for holding. Game over.

"I asked him who held and who was held and he couldn't tell me," said Mike Giddings, "I visited the officials' dressing room and checked this with them. My only other comment was 'you have to be sure to take a game away from a team.'"

The Hawaiians traveled to the Pacific Northwest to face Portland. Giddings expected problems with containing Roadrunner Ferguson, saying, "He always seems to save his best games for us."

A small crowd of 7,709 fans at Civic Stadium guaranteed another poor payoff for the team. Not only that, but Calvin Hill missed half the game when he had to leave with strained back muscles and a sore shoulder.

But turnovers put the team in front by 17-7 as Portland fumbled twice and The Hawaiians were able to turn each into a touchdown. First, Rick Cassata passed 15 yards for a touchdown to Dave Atkinson. Then, it was Sixkiller entering the contest and throwing an eight-yard touchdown strike to wide receiver Grady Richardson. The Hawaiians defense made another big play in the third quarter, as cornerback Willie Williams forced Ferguson to fumble and safety Phil Andre grabbed the loose ball and ran 43 yards for a touchdown. Sixkiller added the action point and The Hawaiians held a 25-14 lead, and then held off a late rally by Portland to edge the Thunder, 25-24 to even their record at 1-and-1. "We're happy to get out of Portland with a win," said Giddings, "This is a tough place to win."

The team headed home to the islands for the first time in 18 days. The three-game, 18-day road trip had worn the team out, what with jet leg, time changes, body re-adjustment, and sitting for 40 hours in airplanes traveling 12,000 miles around the country. "This was the longest and toughest road trip of the season and I'm sure glad it's over," said Giddings. So were the players. Its little wonder the NFL has still not added a team in Honolulu.

The trip obviously took its toll, as the team lost to Southern California, 37-19 in their home opener before 15,862 people. But a bigger loss was Calvin Hill.

Hill was having another good game, having already rushed for 45 yards in only 8 carries. It looked like he was going to pay big dividends for the team. "I felt so good at the start," Hill said afterward, "Some games you know you have got it all together."

It did indeed look like Hill had it all together as he grabbed a short screen pass from quarterback Wayne Estabrook in the right flat. Hill followed his blockers around end when defensive back Jack Conners barreled up from his safety position and cut Hill down with a solid but clean tackle.

"I just couldn't believe it," Hill said later, "I saw the defensive back coming and wanted to get off him so I leaped. He must have caught me perfect."

Conners did, and Calvin stayed down, clutching his right knee, as trainer George Kamau and team physician Dr. Jack Morris raced onto the field. Hill was then taken off the field in an ambulance and transported to Queen's Medical Center where he underwent surgery. "Calvin Hill has sustained a complete tear of the left medial collateral ligament and a tear of the posterior capsule of the knee joint," Dr. Morris told reporters after the game, "Calvin Hill will play football again."

But, unfortunately, *not* for The Hawaiians. His season was over. The team's big drawing card was gone. Not only that, the Sun lit up the scoreboard for 23 points in the fourth quarter to whip The Hawaiians, 37-19.

"It's tough when you see your best player being carried off the field like that," said Giddings, "It affects a team. Our opening drive was excellent, but we failed to sustain the momentum in the latter part of

the game. At times we had lapses of concentration which resulted in costly penalties, dropped passes and mental errors. They have to be corrected."

The Hawaiians were whistled for 10 penalties for 65 yards, while Estabrook completed only 8 of 27 passes, had three passes picked off and was sacked three times.

The headlines in the next day's *Honolulu Advertiser* read, "Sun Beat the Hill out of Hawaiians." Clever, but cruelly harsh considering the team had just lost its best player.

"It's a little sore right now," said Hill, "but it will get better in time." Hill would go on to play six more years in the NFL, three each with the Redskins and Browns.

Meanwhile, who knows what kind of season Hill might have had if he had stayed healthy. He had already rushed 49 times for 218 yards, a 4.4 yards per carry clip. The Hawaiians had a decent veteran offensive line for him to run behind, and with some luck Hill might have had a monster year. But the WFL never did have much luck, and the deadly combination of poor weather and unfortunate injuries was submitting the league to a slow painful death.

Giddings tried to put a positive spin on the situation. "He was a major part of our ballclub," the coach said, "We'll just have to band together during this crisis and it's been The Hawaiians history that we do best with our backs to the wall."

Their backs were against the wall. With Hill out, The Hawaiians had to rely on Clayton Heath, who gained 73 yards against the Sun in relief of Hill, and veteran holdovers Albert Davis and Vin Clements, who hadn't done much so far. The team needed some help.

So, while recovering from his injury, Hill decided to call his old teammate, Duane Thomas, who had been released by the Redskins. Hill talked to Thomas about possibly signing with The Hawaiians, enjoy the islands, and, oh yeah, maybe play some football. Thomas, despite the problems and troubles that had seemed to dog him, was a real talent, and The Hawaiians were willing to take a flyer on him in the hopes he could regain the magic that had made him a very feared runner early in his career.

Thomas was supposed to appear against Chicago on a one game basis. This agreement was between The Hawaiians and Hemmeter. The Hawaiians said they were hoping to sign Thomas to a regular contract. Philadelphia, however, led by GM Rich Iannarella, claimed that Thomas was actually the property of the Bell. This was due to a league by-law that stated that any players released from the Redskins were property of the Bell, which held the territorial rights to the Redskins' players. "Philadelphia affirms its WFL negotiating rights to Duane Thomas," said Iannarella, "If Thomas plays for Hawaii, we will sue if Hemmeter doesn't arrange some sort of compensation. We'll give the President an opportunity to straighten it out, but we aren't going to take this lying down."

Hemmeter repeated that the appearance "is only a one-game agreement and it is perfectly legal."

The Hawaiians principal owner, Edward Sultan, Jr., added, "We've already reached an agreement with the Bell" for compensation.

When he was asked if the two clubs had been in negotiations, Iannarella acknowledged that the teams had indeed engaged in some discussions and that the talks had been "very amicable," adding that they hoped to resolve the compensation issue by some time later that night.

"But we want to get a front-line player," Iannarella insisted, "someone this year." The Bell GM would not go into naming names but did say, "We need linemen."

Thomas was also negotiating with The Hawaiians, and hoped to get a long-term contract.

In any event, Duane Thomas rushed 5 times for 17 yards, but was cheered warmly by the 10,311 fans in attendance. Thomas showed his appreciation by doing something he usually shunned—signing autographs after the game.

But seventeen yards rushing was not exactly what Giddings, George Najarian and the team had in mind when they signed Thomas. The brass would have to wait on any dividends from Thomas until the legalities of them using Thomas had been ironed out with the Bell.

With Thomas not being of much help, Heath picked up the slack, running for 120 yards in 23 carries. Still, The Hawaiians fell behind Chicago, 17-3 before Sixkiller, in relief of an ineffective Estabrook, threw three touchdown passes to lead The Hawaiians to a 28-17 victory over the Winds. "He threw hard and with authority," said Delaney of his quarterback.

Three days later, the Bell announced that they had agreed to accept a second-round choice in the 1976 college draft from The Hawaiians as compensation for signing Thomas. After The Hawaiians and the Bell had finally worked out the compensation issue, team legal counsel Wallace Fujiyama gave Thomas a $25,000 signing bonus plus a salary of $5,000 a game.

But without Hill, however, it was obvious that the team would not draw crowds either at home or on the road. In Memphis, the Grizzlies drew their smallest crowd of the season—15,132—and weren't very gracious hosts as they clobbered The Hawaiians, 37-17.

Thanks to a 24-yard field goal by R.A. Coppedge and a 93-yard kickoff return for a touchdown by Clayton Heath, The Hawaiians hung on against the Grizzlies and actually led 10-8 in the second quarter. But Memphis wasted little time in taking control of the game, scoring two quick touchdowns to take a 23-10 lead to basically put the contest away. Even without an injured Larry Csonka, the Grizzlies rolled up 26 first downs and 303 yards rushing. "Give credit to their offensive line, they just whipped us up front," said Giddings.

The Memphis defense sacked Estabrook and Six-killer 6 times and despite the return of Duane Thomas, held The Hawaiians to 54 yards on the ground. Thomas managed just 20 yards in 12 carries. "He didn't have any holes," said Giddings, "It's hard to run anywhere without any holes."

Thomas came away impressed by the Grizzlies. "If you haven't heard about these people," he commented afterward, "it won't take long before you do. Memphis has a fine football team."

With a mediocre 2-and-3 record, at least the team had moving into Aloha Stadium to look forward to. After a little over a season of having to play in the "Termite Palace," The Hawaiians were set to move into brand-new, 60,000-seat Aloha Stadium on September 14th. This was supposed to be a shot in the arm for the franchise. Management hoped that attendance would increase significantly with the team finally out of the old "Palace" and in their new digs.

But, alas, only 18,479 people, far less than half capacity, came out for the opener in the new stadium. This was not terribly encouraging, as owner Edward Sultan Jr. was hoping for crowds at least over 20,000 to help ease the club's financial strain and keep the team's collective heads above water. Besides things like payroll, travel expenses and supplies, The Hawaiians were now going to have to fork out $10,000 a game just to rent Aloha Stadium, plus they still had to cover the $500,000 guaranteed salary of the injured Calvin Hill. They needed cash, but just like 1974, the costs of running a team in Hawaii soon became unmanageable for the franchise.

It seemed that the Kama'aina still hadn't adopted The Hawaiians as their team. Just the day before The Hawaiians played their first game there, the University of Hawaii Rainbow Warriors drew 32,247 people when they christened the stadium against Texas A & I.

Despite the disappointing crowd, The Hawaiians raced to an 11-0 lead and beat Jacksonville, 33-15 to even their record at 3-and-3. Sonny Sixkiller, honored at halftime with an American Indian Day ceremony, hit Tim Delaney with scoring passes of 15, 15 and 16 yards, completing 20 of 31 passes for 209 yards. Delaney grabbed 8 passes for 99 yards.

Back-up quarterback Rick Cassata threw a 24-yard touchdown pass to Albert Davis on a fake field goal attempt. But the rushing game struggled as newcomer Walt Wingard, a speedy rookie from the University of Dayton, led the team with only 38 yards on the ground. Thomas added just 28 yards on 9 carries.

A week later, on a chilly and windy September 21st in San Antonio, Thomas' disappointing season continued as he rushed just 6 times for only 18 yards. This was hardly the type of production that Giddings and the team had been hoping for when they signed Thomas. The team lost big, 30-11.

"I don't know about Duane," said George Najarian, "I thought I was getting a great player who wouldn't talk. Now he talks a lot but doesn't play."

Thomas projected none of the persona he had become famous for—or infamous for, depending on your point of view—in the NFL. He talked to the media, signed autographs, and carried himself in a professional manner. He even laughed with local sportscasters, talked about his days in the NFL, and his hopes for the WFL and The Hawaiians.

But people could clearly see that Thomas was not the same runner he had been.

"I really didn't feel he was the same player," said Hill, "Part of his demise, I think, came when he lost all that weight. At 220 he was a slasher who could run with power and pick a side, never give you a whole shot at him. He became a finesse runner. He changed. I think he lost a little speed, too, when he lost his edge. He was always a smooth but explosive runner. He lost that explosion."

"No drugs, I can guarantee that," said John Wilbur, who had been a teammate of Thomas' on the Redskins, "I saw him every day. I would have known. He was clean, but he never did anything for us on the field. He was into his heavy vegetarian phase, plus he'd lost all that weight.

"I had no problems with him at practice," Wilbur continued, "He just couldn't play. He'd play at a jog, he'd put it on cruise control. He wasn't exploding, he was loping, like he'd lost his fast-twitch muscles."

"When he came to practice," said Mike Giddings, "he'd already had a full day's workout under his belt. He'd have run eight miles. Maybe he realized he'd lost his burst so he became a long distance runner type. He had moves and could catch a pass, but he'd lost his power burst. He weighed less than 200 pounds, too."

The fans seemed to love Thomas, although he went around the islands not in traditional island dress or casual wear, but in a business suit. "That's all he wore," said Hill, "and you know how people dress on the islands."

In San Antonio, the team quickly fell behind, 15-0 and although they crawled back to trail 15-11, they were never really in the game. Sixkiller had a dreadful day, completing just 17 of 40 passes and had three of his tosses intercepted. He was also sacked three times.

The Hawaiians, trailing San Antonio and Southern California in the standings, were in Shreveport next, facing the Steamer, who was a half-game behind them. Shreveport came out looking like a first-place club, however, barging to an 18-0 lead. Giddings replaced an erratic Sixkiller with Cassata midway through the second quarter. The change in quarterbacks sparked The Hawaiians somewhat, with the rookie Wingard racing 24 yards for a touchdown and R.A. Coppedge booting a 37-yard field goal. But former Hawaiian Edd Hargett threw his third touchdown pass of the day to put the Steamer up 25-11 at the half.

A pass interference call in the end zone set up a one-yard run by Clayton Heath, but Jim Nance responded with a one-yard plunge of his own near the end of the third quarter to put Shreveport in front by 32-18.

Cassata, who finished 14 of 26 for 160 yards, then pitched a 21-yard touchdown to rookie Steve Haggerty from U.N.L.V. to bring The Hawaiians within seven points at 32-25. The Hawaiians hung tough, and were still in it at the end, but an end zone interception killed their last chance.

Thomas carried the ball only twice for nine yards before he pulled a hamstring.

That week, he confounded Giddings and the team brass by getting physical therapy treatments and then leaving the facility.

"Mike would say, 'Where are you guys going now?' and Duane would say, 'Calvin's gonna show me around the island. We're gonna do some goodwill,'" said Hill, "Duane was really fond of Hawaii, and the people loved him. He was fascinated by them. We'd be driving and he'd say, 'Hey let's stop,' and we'd get out and talk to some fisherman about what he did. It was a real cultural exchange. He felt a kinship with a lot of those people."

In his defense, Thomas said, "The hamstring never really felt right. One of my legs is longer than the other, and I had to go to a chiropractor constantly. The contact in football knocks your joints out of place. It's like driving a car over big holes. You have to constantly realign it. I needed a masseur, too, to actually work out all the kinks."

He never did get the kinks worked out of the hamstring, and wound up playing in just five games, carrying the ball 34 times for only 92 yards.

In late September, The Hawaiians traded backup quarterback Wayne Estabrook to Southern California, and announced that wide receiver Dave Atkinson had retired. "Dave was unhappy playing offense although he was the team's leading receiver," said Giddings, "He is an excellent athlete and I'm sorry to see him go."

Atkinson, however, said he left the team because he had differences with Giddings and due to the fact that he "couldn't live on a WFL salary. We're not getting NFL salaries, but we're putting in NFL time."

The Hawaiians then hosted Birmingham before 18,894 fans. Duane Thomas' hamstring kept him out of action, but the game still got off to a good start for the hosts when defensive back Dave Walker blocked a Vulcans' punt out of the end zone for a safety and a 2-0 Hawaiian lead.

Birmingham took the lead on their next possession, but The Hawaiians marched 62 yards in 15 plays with Clayton Heath capping the drive on a six-yard scoring run on the first play of the second quarter. Later in the quarter, after Birmingham had missed a field goal, Cassata drove his club 80 yards in 11 plays and then hit tight end Mike Donohoe from the six to make it 16-8 at the half.

But the second half was all Birmingham, as the Vulcans held The Hawaiians scoreless and to just 64 yards in offense in the second half. The Vulcans also stacked up The Hawaiians on a fourth-and-inches play with a little over 8 minutes left. Meanwhile, Birmingham scored once in the third quarter and twice more in the fourth to win, 29-16.

The loss was The Hawaiians third in a row and sixth in nine games, dropping them into fourth place in the Western Division. Off the field, the news was also disheartening. The Hawaiians were fourth in the league in attendance, but their average was only 15,887 a game, which guaranteed that they were losing money.

A week later, the team drew only 10,789 fans for their game against Philadelphia, their worst turnout since September 1st, 1974.

Just before hosting the Bell, The Hawaiians released Thomas in a cost-cutting move to rid themselves of his $5,000 a game salary. Thomas showed up at the game to play, anyway, but wound up in The Hawaiians broadcast booth as a radio color commentator.

The Hawaiians lost the battle of statistics but won the battle on the scoreboard. Philadelphia had more first downs (25 to 11), more yards (412 to 183), and jumped out to a 10-0 halftime lead. The Hawaiians

also lost Clayton Heath to knee and ankle injuries. But Cassata found Donohoe for a 13-yard touchdown to draw The Hawaiians to within 10-7. A Bell field goal in the fourth quarter made it 13-7, but later in the quarter, defensive end Karl Lorch swiped a Bob Davis pass and rumbled 41 yards to the end zone to put the Hawaiians up for the first time all day, 14-13.

Philadelphia had a chance to win it with 12 seconds left, but defensive end Lem Burnham blocked a 23-yard Philadelphia field goal attempt with time running out.

Two days after the team lost to the Bell, the league's Board of Governors met in New York City in what was termed a "critical" meeting. It was no mystery that the WFL was in dire financial straits, and league President Chris Hemmeter said the governors were considering several options. "We can go along as we are;" said Hemmeter, "We can try to fund ourselves where we are weak; we can cut out our weaker markets; or we can shut down."

The Portland, Philadelphia and San Antonio franchises were on the ropes, but the league decided to continue playing and keep all their teams intact. The Hawaiians were well-financed but the attendance figures had been disappointing, and the team was still sagging under the weight of the rent they owed for Aloha Stadium and Calvin Hill's contract. This became apparent when several days before their next game with the Southern California Sun, The Hawaiians asked their players to take pay cuts from $500 a game to $250 to save the franchise.

"There is no question that we are in real difficulty," said Giddings.

"We are not unhappy with local attendance figures," said GM David Stringer, "but a show of good faith Sunday night certainly wouldn't hurt things."

When asked about the proposed pay cuts, Stringer responded, "We feel we owe it to our players to ask them if they wish to continue playing under these conditions. I would respect any decision they make."

The team voted and decided they didn't want to play under the conditions. Practice on Wednesday the 15th and Thursday the 16th had to be canceled. The team's two quarterbacks, Sonny Sixkiller and Rick Cassata, roomed together and went home, and then didn't get word that the team had called another meeting. They didn't show up at this subsequent meeting, during which the team reversed its decision and decided to play after all when management agreed to no pay cuts.

When Sixkiller and Cassata did not show up for practice on Friday the 17th, they were released. So the team was going to play but they suddenly had no quarterbacks.

Two days before the game Giddings put in a frantic call to Jim Fassel, who had been a quarterback / coach for the Hawaiians in '74 until he injured his knee. Fassel was working in the air conditioning business in Utah, and received the call from Giddings in the middle of the night. The coach came right out and asked Fassel what kind of shape he was in, and if he could he play quarterback the next night.

"I told him I hadn't thrown a ball in a year, who else you got?" Fassel recalled. "He said they had a local kid—Milt "The Pineapple" Holt, who had played football at Harvard and had a job at Honolulu City Hall—and I said, 'Why don't you play him?' I still hadn't gotten my knee fixed."

After some negotiating, Fassel agreed to be Holt's backup. He asked for $500 and a prepaid round-trip airline ticket. That was just in case the league happened to fold, and he didn't want to get stuck in Hawaii. He also insisted on a signed affidavit stating the WFL had paid its insurance premium in full.

"I was a player / coach for the Hawaiians the first year and I didn't go back the second year. I went into business," Fassel explained. "I told them if I could ever help them, I would. So they called me at two in the morning the day before the game and asked if I would fly over and play quarterback.

"I hadn't played a game in a year and a half and my wife thought I was crazy. I said I do it as a favor; it wasn't what I wanted to do. So I jumped on a plane at six in the morning and flew over there and played in that game. The only reason that the Hawaiians phoned me was I was with the Hawaiians the first year and Mike Giddings told me when he phoned me that you are the only guy that knows this offense and can play quarterback. The problem was I had a bad knee that needed fixing and I never got it fixed and I hadn't played in a year and a half.

"The league folded the next day or the following day that's why I wanted a prepaid ticket. Once the league folded I was on the next plane."

Running back Walt Wingard, wide receiver Tim Delaney, and defensive end Lem Burnham also boycotted practice, but were kept on the roster. To shore up their depleted offense, The Hawaiians quickly signed rookie running back Albert Holmes from the University of Hawaii, and moved defensive back Chuck Detwiler to the offensive side of the ball.

"We'll play this game," said Giddings, who himself indicated he might boycott the game rather than face

the Sun unprepared, "We want to save pro football in Hawaii."

In the end, Giddings didn't boycott the game, Detwiler played offense for the first time in his pro career, and Holt, Fassel and Holmes all played on a moment's notice, but their efforts did not save football in Hawaii.

The Hawaiians lost to the Sun 26-7, before 15,905 fans, as neither Holt, who hit on 5 of 16 passes for 91 yards, nor Fassel, who completed 1 of 3 tosses for 10 yards, could sustain any semblance of an offense. The Hawaiians managed just 11 first downs and 167 yards in offense and turned the ball over three times. Holt did earn the distinction of throwing the last touchdown pass in WFL history.

The game turned out to be the last one for The Hawaiians, as three days, later, the WFL finally called it quits.

It was also the final contest in the career of Ken Bowman. His last was no different than the other 130-plus games he had played in pro football. He played hard, played hurt and played to win.

"I played my final game against Dave Roller of the Sun," Bowman said. Roller had been named to the All-WFL team in 1974 and was considered one of the top defensive linemen in the league. He would go on to play six years in the NFL. He was also seven years younger than Bowman and outweighed him by 38 pounds.

Bowman smiled and said proudly, "He told me that I blocked the hell out of him."

CHAPTER 25

A Train Wreck

The Jacksonville Express, 1975

"I really don't know why I got into the Jacksonville franchise."
—Jacksonville Express President and Governor EARL KNABB

Howard Tippett never will forget the day the crane came and hoisted away the blocking sled.

"'We had a morning practice scheduled for training camp in Jacksonville," said Tippett, the defensive coordinator for the Jacksonville Express. "'We were getting ready to go out on the field when a truck pulled up with this huge crane. It hooked up to our seven-man sled and just drove off with it. The team had not paid its bills the year before, and we all watched it drive off in the distance. We decided not to have seven-man sled work that day."

The equipment was hauled away on orders from Bud Asher, the head coach of the Sharks who recently had won an $82,000 lawsuit against Sharks' owner Fran Monaco. Asher said the equipment was the property of the Sharks and that the team owed him the money.

Such was life in the Wiffle. Crises happened at the drop of a hat. Like the Marines, you had to learn to "improvise, adapt and overcome."

After the Sharks went "belly up" in 1974, no one knew if pro football would ever return to Jacksonville. But despite all the problems of '74, there was, surprisingly, some interest to bring the game back to "The Bold New City of the South."

Unfortunately, that interest seemed limited to three people—Sharks' head coach Charlie Tate, one of his assistants, Jim Niblack, and one of his quarterbacks, Kay Stephenson. When the Sharks' folded, those three stayed in Jacksonville, spending their own time and money to scout players and attend any league meetings that came up. They refused to give up the football ghost in Jacksonville.

"The league fell apart in 1974," said Tate, "With our poor management in Jacksonville, we fell out after the 14th game. For awhile it looked impossible, but Chris Hemmeter started things going again.

"I paid my own way to Memphis to talk to him, and I became convinced that the league was going to make it."

The three diehards knew that despite their best intentions, what they really needed was money to make the team go.

The first potential investor to come forward was Al Grillo, who owned the Seminole Turf Club. But after trying to come up with a purchase price, and basically unsure of the Wiffle's future, Grillo bowed out.

"Then we found Mr. Knabb," said Tate.

Stephenson had suggested that he knew a local man named Earl Knabb that he had met while coaching at MacClenny High School who might be able to help them financially.

The three went to visit Knabb, and told him it would take several million dollars to prop up the team. The trio was undoubtedly surprised when Knabb said he'd agree to help.

The next order of business was for Knabb to meet with Hemmeter. The trio arranged that meeting, and Hemmeter came away convinced that Knabb could run the team.

"I really don't know why I got into the Jacksonville franchise," admitted Knabb, "It's just something that's been a dream. One day you start talking about it, and pretty soon you've talked yourself into it. We really have professional people in charge of the team this time. With the Hemmeter Plan for operating a professional sports league we're in the best hands possible."

Earl Knabb was a 60-year-old native Floridian and land developer who became the team's principal investor, Governor—as the league referred to its team owners in 1975—and President.

Knabb found financial support in Lefferts Mabie, a Pensacola attorney, to join the group and also dragged along two other attorneys, Harry Meshaw and Bill DeCarlis. Two Jacksonville doctors, Charlie Mabry and Lewis Obi, rounded out the merry band. If nothing else, the team led the league in owners with unique names. These five came up with the $750,000 needed to purchase the club.

In late April, Sharks' owner Fran Monaco tried to throw a big ol' monkey wrench into the works. He filed a $10-million law suit against the reorganized WFL, asking that the purchase of the Jacksonville franchise be delayed until the suit was decided. Monaco was charging in his suit that he was damaged when former WFL commissioner Gary Davidson forced him to reduce his price for the territorial rights to northern Florida which Monaco contended was a restraint of trade.

Kim Hammond, quarterback for the beleaguered Sharks and a lawyer who represented most of his teammates in their fight for back pay, was disgusted by Monaco's action.

"It really is inconceivable to me," said Hammond, "Here's a guy who has failed to pay his players and so many other bills, and yet he's the one filing suit!"

Jacksonville Mayor Hans Tanzler and City Council President Johnny Sanders welcomed the team to town at a press conference, Tanzler saying he was "confident the mistakes of last year's Jacksonville Sharks will not be repeated this year."

Meshaw, who was acting as the team's general counsel, said the new organization had no obligation to shell out any back pay owed the former Sharks' players by the previous owners, and added that Sharks' creditors "won't get one dime" from the new owners.

In an effort to give the team a local flavor, and to avoid any more possible lawsuits from Fran Monaco, the group chose "Express" as the team's nickname, reflecting the city's railroad history. At least it had a lot more local feel than "Jaguars." They also changed the team colors from silver and black to black, red and gold.

"We've had a time getting back on our feet," Tate declared, "We had to pull strings even to get our phones installed, because none of the bills of last year were paid by the previous management. One bill came in for the grooming of Mrs. Fran Monaco's poodle."

The Sharks had also reportedly spent $50,000 to fly to Hawaii for one game. In 1975, however, the Express travel budget for the entire season was less than $50,000.

Developing a more austere budget came about when Dick Kravitz, general manager of the Jacksonville Suns baseball team, was brought in as GM for the Express. Kravitz was a 34-year-old financial whiz who had turned the Suns into a money making business for the first time in years. He took a woebegone franchise that had averaged about 500 fans a game to one that drew 1,500 people per contest in 1973, and because of his efforts, was named GM of the Year for all of minor league baseball.

"I don't want to sound like I'm blowing smoke or anything, but we did a good job with the Suns," said Kravitz, "Their attendance was down, the money was down, the image was bad. When we took over there, people were skeptical, but we operated the team for two years at a profit.

"A lot of the people I dealt with then, I'm dealing with now," Kravitz went on, "They know me and they know the way I operate. I know some of them are thinking, 'Well, if he did it for baseball, maybe he can do it for football.' It may be guarded optimism, but at least it isn't skepticism."

Kravitz started out by trying to put as much distance between the Express and the Sharks as he could. He moved the team offices from the 18th floor of the Gulf-Life Building down the street to the Hilton Hotel. He took a hard line on player's salaries and cut loose the hangers-on who ate up the profits of any pro football team. "We've turned away players who have asked for too much money," said Kravitz, "We're selling future.

"We have to create an image of responsibility," Kravitz continued, "We want people to know we're spending our money prudently and cautiously. We're no fancy dans here. Our office furniture isn't used but it's of the budget variety. We haven't ordered the most expensive stationary and we haven't leased any cars for the staff.

"That's the way it has to be," Kravitz went on, "We have to create an image of responsibility. I know some of my decisions haven't been popular, but I'm not out to win a popularity contest. I don't care if they call me an S.O.B. What's important is to guard our money supply carefully, because without money there is no team."

In an effort to convince the creditors that there really was a money supply, Kravitz made it a point to pay for everything in cash. "We don't have any 30-day billing," said the GM, "I told the owners that wherever I went, I was taking the checkbook with me. The only way to build confidence is to pay for things right up front. It's cost us a lot of money; I'd say a half-million already. But it's the only way to establish the kind of credit we need."

"Sure there's a credibility gap with our league, but we're rectifying things," added Charlie Tate, "Our football budget is about $2.5-million, and we're paying cash for everything."

Kravitz's plan for the Express seemed to be working, as his sales staff had little trouble drumming up local advertisers. Even the fans seemed ready to give the WFL and the Express another chance, as they scarfed up 200 season tickets the first day they were available.

"We know a lot of people got taken last year," Kravitz said, "Players didn't get paid, advertisers lost money, season ticket holders got shortchanged. But nobody lost a fortune and I think the people realize this is a whole new ball game. We can't be blamed for the Sharks' mistakes; nobody holds us responsible."

Kravitz did not hesitate when asked if he could sell Jacksonville on the WFL, which had left a bad taste in the town's mouth in '74. "I don't think there's a question about it," Kravitz responded confidently, "Despite what happened here last year, I think most people are willing to give the WFL another shot."

One front office person who knew all about what had happened in '74 was John Gain, the lone holdover from the Sharks' front office.

"I don't think anybody really knows how much money we lost," said Gain, "We had no bookkeeper, no ticket manager, nothing. It was a family run operation out of a cigar box. Trouble is, the box was always empty."

Gain said that Sharks' owner Fran Monaco spent money like there was no tomorrow, and eventually for the Sharks, there wasn't one. "We had a man who had absolutely no business making executive decisions," Gain went on, "If you want to know what killed the Sharks, it was lack of management and lack of dollars."

"We're doing what we consider to be reasonably well here building in the wake of the disaster of last year," said Stan Olejnik, the team's P.R. Director, "We are encountering problems. Major advertisers for our program have been hesitant because of what happened last year. But we think that will disappear when we tee it up.

"We think we've got football fans in Jacksonville. We may not have dancing girls, marching bands and colorful pennants this year, but we're certainly going to have football here. Last year it was frills and no substance. This year there won't be many frills but there will be substance."

But Kravitz knew he was facing an uphill battle. To placate and ultimately entice 1974's 14,000 season ticket holders to re-up with the Express, Kravitz offered them a deal where they could receive three free games in '75 if they bought a season package. But there were no takers.

He knew the Gator Bowl was of no help either. "The drainage was bad, the restrooms were bad and it was really a horrendous experience playing a whole season there," Kravitz would recall years later.

Still, the GM remained optimistic. "What I like best is a challenge," Kravitz maintained at the time, "Our goal is to sell 20,000 season tickets. If we fall short, it won't shock me. After last year, if we sell 10,000, I'll be happy. People who are skeptical will come game to game."

But the skeptical people seemed to be winning out. Season ticket sales lagged far behind even Kravitz's modest projections. By late July, the team had still sold only 5,000 season ticket packages.

"I know the operation this year is all right, but I can't tell them it's all right," Kravitz insisted, "We have to make up for the problems the Sharks caused.

"Following a bad act and helping make it something else, that's the beauty," Kravitz went on, "We did it with baseball, and there's a lot of satisfaction in it."

"I like to talk in business terms," Kravitz concluded, "Promotion is a dirty word to some people. They see a guy with a cigar in his mouth and a deal up his sleeve. Nobody promotes a toothpaste. They market it. That's what we are trying to do with football. If our team is competitive, people will support it. You'll never see us beg people to support the Jacksonville Express. We'll just put the team on the field and give them something to support."

The Express turned out to be surprisingly competitive, but the people did not support it like Kravitz predicted they would, and before long, the GM and the team owners would indeed have to resort to begging people to come watch their team.

But until that day arrived, Kravitz had to put a team together. He along with Tate and Kay Stephenson, who had been named Director of Player Personnel, were able to convince a good number of former Sharks to re-up with the team. Tight end Dennis Hughes, running back Alfred Haywood, offensive linemen Mike Haggerty, Larry Gagner and Howard Kindig, defensive lineman Carleton Oats, linebackers Rich Thomann and Fred Abbott, and defensive backs Ron Coppenbarger and Fletcher Smith all signed with the Express. Two rookie defensive backs, Abb Ansley and Steve Foley, were also inked to contracts.

"We've got some good boys out there," Tate said proudly, "some boys who can play football. I think this league is going to do well. And the Express will be right up there."

At the end of May, the team shipped defensive tackle Bob Tatarek to Birmingham for the rights to World Bowl MVP quarterback George Mira. "The Matador," who had gone to the University of Miami, was an immediate hit with the fans.

"I was excited," recalled Mira, "I was back in my home state, playing in Jacksonville which is a nice city. We had some good players, and I thought we had a shot at the playoffs."

One last move, which garnered a lot of press, was the signing of the WFL's leading rusher in 1974, Tommy Reamon.

"Tommy was a great running back," remembered George Mira, "He had a lot of speed, a lot of moves, ran the ball well and did a pretty decent job for the short time we played together in 1975."

"In June, after I had offers from the Steelers, who owned my NFL rights, and the Toronto Argonauts of the CFL, I signed a one-year contract worth $100,000 with the Express," Reamon wrote in his autobiography, *Rough Diamonds*. "I was very happy to be back in the state of Florida. I received a $25,000 bonus—it was the largest amount of money that I had ever had.

"The contract that I signed was called a personal service agreement with the owner of the Express," Reamon continued, "Again, I was afraid that the league would fold, so I wanted to make sure that I was paid. The agreement stated that if the league stopped playing at any time, I would be paid immediately by the owner."

Of course, this being the weird and wacky WFL, even something as mundane as a player signing couldn't go off without a hitch of some kind.

After the Express signed Reamon, the team was fined by the Wiffle because the team had signed him before working out and completing a deal with the San Antonio Wings, the team that had his rights.

Harry Meshaw said the team was under a 24-hour deadline to try and sign Reamon or he would have gone to either the NFL or CFL. "We did nothing wrong and are not going to allow ourselves to be penalized for it," said Meshaw, who stated that the team would appeal the fine, which consisted of a portion of the gate receipts from both Express / Wings games.

Meshaw maintained that the Express received permission from San Antonio head coach Perry Moss and Assistant Player Personnel Director Pete Kundos before they even talked to Reamon. "They said 'Sure, go ahead, because we can't sign him,'" stated Meshaw, "The San Antonio people even gave us his telephone number and told us how to reach him."

Even Reamon himself said, "As far as I'm concerned, Jacksonville acted in a completely businesslike manner. San Antonio knew Jacksonville was negotiating with me, and I knew San Antonio was aware of the situation."

Then, Meshaw said, after working out a deal with Reamon's attorney, several attempts were made to reach San Antonio officials and make an offer for the rights to Reamon.

"We tried for three days to find someone connected with the San Antonio team, and no one except a secretary was in," said Meshaw, "We left messages all over Texas, and we didn't hear from them.

Once the Express came to terms with Reamon, according to Meshaw, the Wings became evasive when the Express asked them in what form they wanted to be compensated for their loss. "In fact," Meshaw stated, "we didn't hear from them until after Reamon signed. That's when their Governor (Norm Bevan) called Hemmeter and started crying."

Jacksonville opened its exhibition season schedule in Chicago, and beat the Winds, 34-23 in the rain. Coach Charlie Tate said the rain didn't hurt the Express, which had practiced for three weeks in the stuff at camp at Jacksonville University. "We weren't out of our element," Tate said.

Reamon picked up right where he left off with the Florida Blazers, rushing 18 times for 103 yards and three touchdowns. Two of his scores came in the fourth quarter and gave the Express a 34-16 lead.

"We kept the same team in the game all the way on offense and we started coming together in the fourth quarter," said Reamon.

Rookie Steve Foley, who had been a quarterback at Tulane, played in the defensive backfield for the first time since high school and picked off two passes, both of which set up touchdowns. "The coaches told me just to play back deep until I got the speed of the game," said Foley, "That helped me more than anything else because of the rain at Soldier Field." Foley attributed his success to luck, but his roommate George Mira disagreed. "He's not lucky," Mira said, "He played a heckuva game. I've been helping him and I guess he learns quicker than I thought."

Foley learned so quickly that he almost picked off a third pass. "I thought I had faked the interception pretty well," Foley smiled, "but the officials didn't call it."

Foley had passed on the NFL for the World Football League because of a $10,000 difference in salary offers. Foley signed with the Express, where former All-Pro safety Johnny Robinson was the secondary coach.

"He had all the ingredients," Robinson said of Foley at the time. "His talent just had to be refined, that's all. Steve made perhaps the toughest adjustment in

football in going from quarterback to the secondary. Not many athletes could."

Foley maintained that Robinson was the person most responsible for that successful switch, the source of both his technique and playing mindset. "He honed my skills," Foley said, "and gave me his temperament. Johnny showed me what to do, how to do it, laughed when I didn't, and then assured me that everyone gets beat now and then and that when it happened I just had to forget it.

"Johnny Robinson was one of the greatest safeties in NFL history, and he had a huge impact on me spiritually as well as athletically," Foley remembered, adding with some amazement, "and he only coached me for one year."

Foley would go on to have a long, distinguished career with the NFL's Denver Broncos.

The only negative aspect of the evening was that the team lost both running back Ricky Lake, the team's second-leading rusher in '74, and defensive lineman Doug Faust to knee injuries.

Two weeks later, the Express hosted The Hawaiians in their exhibition season finale.

"The Hawaiians look like a good team in the film of their game against Charlotte," said Tate, "They have a big defense and two good quarterbacks."

Tate decided to start five rookies on defense—Charles Hall at defensive end, Kenny Moore at defensive tackle, Ricky Browne at linebacker, Steve Foley at one corner, and Abb Ansley at safety.

With the five rookies holding their own, the Express beat The Hawaiians, 19-7 in another deluge that dropped 5 inches of rain on the city of Jacksonville. The conditions turned the game into a comedy of errors, as the teams combined for seven turnovers. Because of the forecast, which had called for heavy rains in the area, only 8,222 fans showed up.

"This is the wettest game I've ever played in," said Mira of the downpour that flooded both sidelines. The rain actually led to one of the Express touchdowns. On a field goal try in the second quarter, the snap was awful and Mira, the holder, couldn't reach it. Kicker Charlie Durkee picked up the errant snap then looked up and tossed a nine-yard touchdown pass to Ron Lamb.

"I gotta be careful about Durkee or he might have my job," joked Mira.

"I promise not to throw another one," laughed Durkee.

"It was one of those Yepremian jobs that worked," added Tate, referring to kicker Garo Yepremian's infamous attempted pass in Super Bowl VII.

Afterward, Hawaiians coach Mike Giddings criticized Tate for leaving his regulars in too long and trying to win the game while Giddings said he was just preparing for the regular season. "Hell," Tate replied, "I want to win ALL the games."

Following the game, the Express cut four players, including Eddie McAshan, who spent part of the '74 season as the Sharks' starting quarterback. McAshan didn't take a snap during the exhibition season, having gotten caught in a numbers game with Mira and rookie David Fowler on board (not to mention Foley, who could be called on in an emergency).

Ron Lamb, who had re-signed with the Express and caught Durkee's touchdown pass, retired after the game and went back to coaching the team's running backs and special teams.

Jacksonville opened the regular season in Memphis. "We'll find out if Larry Csonka is for real," said Tate, "I'm sure Csonka will be substantial, but he won't run roughshod over our league."

Csonka didn't run roughshod over the Express on August 2nd, but he was quite substantial, gaining a team-high 99 yards on a mild and sunny afternoon, with both Elvis Presley and WFL President Chris Hemmeter on hand. His running mate, Jim Kiick, scored three touchdowns, and the Express lost a heartbreaker, 27-26.

The Grizzlies had scored with 41 seconds left to take a 27-19 lead. But the Express roared right back down the field following the kickoff. Finally, with two seconds left, Mira heaved a desperation pass toward tight end Dennis Hughes, who leaped over defensive back Seth Miller to catch the ball in the end zone. The Express now needed just a successful action point to tie it, and send the game into overtime. Alfred Haywood tried to skirt right end, but defensive tackle John Jordan and linebacker Bob Lally threw Haywood to the turf to end the game.

"It's always tough to have one get away when you're so close," said Tate, "We did find out a couple things about our team, however, and it's a fact that they just don't give up."

Mira threw for 173 yards and two touchdowns, while Haywood outshone both Csonka and Kiick with 107 yards on the ground. On defense linebacker Fred Abbott had 10 tackles while defensive linemen Charles Hall and Carleton Oats each registered a sack.

It was a tough, hard fought game. A hard hit by defensive end Don Brumm had sent Csonka to the sidelines for a short time in the first quarter. "Who's that Number 84?" Csonka mumbled to a teammate as he sat on the bench. Reportedly, Csonka told Mira after the game that he had never been hit harder in a game before.

After a bye week, Jacksonville hosted the defending champs, Birmingham. With 16,049 on hand at the Gator Bowl, the Express whipped the Vulcans, 22-11. Mira, who told reporters "I was just going out there to win," completed 10 passes for 179 yards against his old teammates. Reamon rushed for 128 yards and two touchdowns.

"It's been hard for us to get our timing with the rain and the week off," said Reamon, "but we're getting better and we'll improve."

The defense was tough all game, recording three quarterback sacks and forcing seven turnovers. "Our defensive line has put a lot of pressure on the quarterback and that's the strength over last year's team," said Fred Abbott, who had one of the sacks among his six total tackles. Birmingham was also hurt by 10 untimely penalties.

A week later, Durkee kicked a Wiffle record four field goals, three of them from over 40 yards out, and the last one with 32 seconds left in regulation to tie the game, as the Express whipped San Antonio in overtime, 26-19. Abb Ansley had saved the game with an interception of a Johnnie Walton pass as regulation time ran out.

After San Antonio failed to move the chains on their first possession in overtime, punter David Yaege kicked to Willie Jackson, who returned the ball 28 yards to the Wings 31. One third down, Mira scrambled for an 11-yard gain. Two plays later, Haywood rumbled into the end zone from 15 yards out to give the Express the win, 26-19.

"We kept our poise and everybody knew just what they had to do and then they simply went out and did it," said a happy but tired Mira.

"If you can win a game like this one you can win them all," exclaimed Charlie Tate, "Everybody did their job and executed well. When you can win these kinds of games, it gives the whole team a lot of confidence and brings them closer together. Those are the things you can't coach into a team."

On August 30th, a steady rain fell on the Gator Bowl. The field quickly turned into a quagmire. "I wish we could get the weather on our side," GM Dick Kravitz told owner Earl Knabb. "We've only had two games all year when it hasn't rained." The rain kept the crowd to only 16,428 patrons.

Very few things went right for the Express besides the weather. Charlotte scored on its first possession of the game to take a quick lead. The Hornets then scored a second touchdown as linebacker Fred Abbott, the team's leading tackler, fought off a block but felt his knee snap as running back Lewis Jolley ran past to make it 15-0. Abbott was finished for the year. A field goal made it 18-0 at the half, and then a pass interference call in the end zone against the Express set up another score and a 25-0 lead. Tate finally yanked Mira, who had struggled in the mud, completing just 6 of 14 passes and having two picked off, and put in rookie David Fowler. "We just weren't prepared to play," said Tate.

A week later in Shreveport, the Express bounced back from their loss to Charlotte with a solid 22-15 win over the Steamer. Haywood, who Tate said "played a real fine football game," rushed for 123 yards and a touchdown and earned the game ball. Reamon added 66 more yards on the ground. Kicker and wanna be quarterback Charlie Durkee continued his accurate kicking, booting two more field goals in as many tries, including a 42-yarder.

The Express' opportunistic defense forced five fumbles, and Glen Gaspard, filling in for the injured Abbott, had a key interception. One of the fumbles came after a hard hit by Don Brumm that separated wide receiver Doug Winslow from the ball. Linebacker Chip Myrtle picked the ball out of mid air and ran it back 8 yards. Several plays later, Haywood slammed into the end zone to give Jacksonville a lead, 19-15 that they never relinquished.

"Chip's recovery broke the game open for us," said Tate. A week later, Tate was singing a different tune.

"We didn't do anything right out there today," Tate said, after the Express lost to The Hawaiians in Honolulu, 33-15, "We had a complete mental breakdown. It was our worst game all year." It just might have been, as Jacksonville fell behind, 26-0, just as the fat lady started to sing.

The offense sputtered all afternoon, gaining just 196 yards in total offense and registering only 9 first downs. Mira and David Fowler each had two passes picked off and were sacked three times. Mira finally had to leave the game when he cut a finger and suffered a bruised knee.

Jacksonville next hosted Philadelphia in the Gator Bowl, and the 70,000-seat facility looked practically empty with only 10,269 fans in the stands. Although the team was playing well, the owners knew that playing in front of almost 60,000 empty seats was not going to cut it.

Fowler subbed for an injured Mira, and this time played well, and Reamon and Haywood combined for 162 yards rushing as Jacksonville edged Philadelphia, 16-10.

The Bell led, 10-8 near the end of the first half, but linebacker Chip Myrtle stepped in front of a Bob Davis pass and chugged 65 yards deep into Bell territory.

With just 20 seconds left before the half, Fowler was forced to scramble on a pass play and gained only 5 yards. Tate rushed the kicking team into the game, but a bobbled snap aborted the attempt. "I thought that if we got that field goal and went ahead going into halftime, it would be better than not coming out of there with anything," Tate would say after the game, "I can't second guess myself on the call. We had a problem with the kick and didn't score, but that three points would have looked a whole lot bigger at the end of the game the way things turned out."

The second half belonged to the defenses, as both offenses struggled to move the ball. Both clubs knew a break could decide it, and the Express got it, with Fletcher Smith picking off a Davis pass at his own 41 at the end of the third quarter.

Fowler promptly drove Jacksonville 59 yards to the end zone, expertly mixing his passing and running plays. From the 18, Fowler gave it to Haywood on a draw play and Alfred raced all the way to the end zone. "That play had been working well for us all night," Haywood, who was named offensive MVP of the game, said later, "I think Mike Haggerty threw a big block for me on the touchdown, but all the linemen did a good job and there were a lot of holes for me to pick from."

Late in the fourth quarter, Philadelphia head coach Willie Wood yanked Bob Davis and put in King Corcoran, who immediately sparked the Bell offense to life. In short order, he drove the team to the Jacksonville 7-yard line. But there the Express defense stiffened. On first and goal, defensive back Steve Foley raced up and stopped John Land for a three yard gain. On second down, the Express defense forced Corcoran to throw incomplete. On third down, Jacksonville stopped J.J. Jennings short of the goal line. Finally on fourth down, The King dropped back again. He scrambled, but Don Brumm was waiting and dropped the quarterback to ice the victory for the Express.

"That goal line stand sure was the big play of the game," said Tate afterward.

During the week before their next game, the team's financial problems that were being caused by the poor attendance figures came to light. The Express players were asked by management to renegotiate their contracts to help the franchise save money. Just like their league brethren, the Express were starting to feel a money pinch.

"Earl Knabb and Charlie Tate called us in one at a time," recalled Mira, "They discussed restructuring our contracts, taking pay cuts, to save the team. Some of the guys, most of the guys did. They were trying to lower costs and save money. I was more than willing to take a pay cut to save the league."

"Everybody has agreed to this move except two players," said Harry Meshaw, "and we might have a little trouble with them."

Mira, back after missing two games and just activated the day before, completed 14 of 25 passes for 223 yards, 2 touchdowns and no picks as Jacksonville whipped Birmingham, 26-18 for the second time in the season.

"It was an important game for us to win," said Mira, who practiced only once in two weeks but was named WFL Player of the Week for his performance. "We needed it to stay in the standings. In spite of everything that went on last week, I think the whole team showed exactly what being a professional is all about with their performance."

"It was as fine a football game as we've played all season," said Charlie Tate, "In spite of the things that went on this week, I feel this was a helluva team effort. We didn't worry about those other things. Our guys just bowed their necks, went out and played a game.

"George Mira was really on," Tate continued, "He gave us a real lift."

Although the Express was a competitive team, they were failing to draw the number of fans needed to keep the team on firm financial ground. The franchise had plenty of operating capital, as well as a strong commitment from team management, but the games were drawing only around 16,000 per contest, about 9,000 short of the team's goal. The franchise was running about $65,000 a week in the red. So far, at least, although they had been asked to take paycuts, the players were being paid and the bills were being paid, but with attendance lower than expected, the team was struggling and hoping for an improvement. It really hadn't helped matters that so far all but one of the team's home games had been played in a downpour.

Despite the fact that the team was 5-and-3 and chasing the leaders in the Eastern Division, the fans continued to avoid the Gator Bowl in droves. When Portland came to town, another sparse crowd of 8,119 fans was in attendance.

"I had hoped for a lot more," GM Dick Kravitz said to owner Lefferts Mabbie as the two looked out over the small gathering.

"We'll lose about $100,000 tonight," replied Mabbie.

"The weather is killing us," responded Kravitz.

So were injuries, especially one to Tommy Reamon, who hurt his ribs against the Thunder.

"I remember I could not breathe very well," Reamon recalled in his autobiography, *Rough Diamonds*, "I let

the trainers talk me into taking a shot of cortisone in my back where the ribs were hurting, and I felt okay for a few minutes. I began to run and couldn't catch my breath. The trainer suggested that I drink a can of Coca-Cola."

A can of Coke? This sounds something like telling a player to "rub a little dirt on it" when he gets hit by the ball.

"I did drink it and I could breathe a little better," Reamon continued, "However, I did not play the remainder of the game, and I went right home. During the middle of the night, my roommate woke me up to say that I sounded like I was having trouble breathing. I was concerned.

"The next morning I went to the hospital emergency room. The doctor examined my ribs and listened to my breathing. He said my lung had collapsed. I asked how that could have happened, and he explained that the cortisone injection that the trainer had given me accidentally punctured a lung.

"If this kind of incident occurred today in sports, I would bet that the team doctor who accidentally punctured a lung while giving a cortisone injection would be sued."

With Reamon out of the lineup due to his collapsed lung, the Hornets keyed on Alfred Haywood and held him to 43 yards on the ground, and Charlotte won 22-15. Former Jacksonville receiver Lee McGriff, cut earlier in the season by the Express, came back to haunt his former teammates by making a circus catch to set up a Charlotte field goal. McGriff wound up being the leading receiver in the game with 3 catches for 66 yards.

After the game, Kravitz had to answer questions as to why McGriff had not stuck with the Express. "We cut him because we were happy with our wide receivers and Lee still isn't in their class," an obviously annoyed Kravitz finally sputtered.

With financial problems spreading league-wide the WFL owners met on October 13 to decide on what to do about their floundering league. Some wanted to stop playing altogether. Some wanted to cut out the "deadwood"—the really struggling teams in Philadelphia, Portland and San Antonio. Still others wanted to keep playing as is. The owners voted and decided on the third option—keep playing as is, and try to prop up some of the more destitute clubs. It didn't work.

With uncertainty hanging in the air, the Express traveled to Portland to face the Thunder on October 19th. Jacksonville would be shorthanded for the game. Reamon was out with his collapsed lung. Alfred Haywood missed the team flight to Portland. Tate had to resort to backups Skip Johns and Jimmy Poulos. The game drew only 8,713 people, meaning the payout for the Express would be meager.

The fans saw Rufus Ferguson shred the Express defense for 141 yards and a touchdown rushing as Portland won easily, 30-13.

With Reamon and Haywood out, the Express managed only 75 yards on the ground. Mira threw the ball 41 times but had only 234 yards and a touchdown pass to Steve Barrios to show for it. In the fourth quarter, he was sacked by Drew Taylor and left the game when he re-injured his gimpy knee.

"Our inability to get the ball into the end zone was the difference in the game," said Tate, "George played a fine ball game. He moved us well, but we just couldn't get in the end zone." The Express had lost two games in a row and had seen their record fall to 6-and-5. Worse yet, they had been completely outplayed and outclassed in the two losses.

But on-field problems quickly took a backseat to the financial plight of the WFL. A little over a week after their last emergency meeting, the owners called another conference. So, three days after the loss to Portland, Earl Knabb and Lefferts Mabbie flew to New York to attend the latest meeting of the Wiffle owners. At the meeting on the 22nd of October, the owners decided to take a vote on whether to continue playing or not.

Three clubs—Memphis, Birmingham and Southern California—were sound. Several other clubs, however, were hanging on by the proverbial thread. The Express had the finances to stay the course, but the awful attendance figures were making things difficult for Knabb and his partners. Still, when the vote was called, Knabb chose to continue playing, but only three other teams voted the same way. The WFL was finished.

"We were told, 'the league is done,'" said George Mira, "we wanted to keep playing. I think it was Jacksonville, San Antonio, Charlotte and Southern California that voted to keep on playing the season." But the rest of the league governors voted to fold up the Wiffle's tattered tent for good.

"The others weren't as financially sound as we thought," said Charlie Tate, "We were sound but they weren't.

"We were preparing for a game," Tate added, "but all of a sudden we don't have a game or a league."

CHAPTER 26

Grin and Bear It

The Memphis Grizzlies, 1975

"It's like a brand-new car. Once you've wrecked it, no matter how well it's fixed up, it's never the same."

—JOHN BASSETT, Owner, Memphis Grizzlies

Those were the words of Memphis owner John Bassett, a man known for his sometimes brutal honesty, as he reflected on the dismal realities of the '74 WFL season.

Despite Bassett's best efforts, the WFL had been a pitiful failure in 1974. Teams moved, folded or teetered on the brink of extinction. Bassett had helped bail out some of his more destitute brethren, but it hadn't helped. The WFL wound up losing truckloads of money and its reputation in the process. By the end of the season, the league had become a joke. Talk of a truly "world" football league had disintegrated in the cold reality of the fact that teams couldn't make it in hamlets such as Charlotte, Shreveport and Orlando, much less make a go of it in Tokyo, Dusseldorf or Munich.

But Memphis was one of the few things about the league that hadn't become the punch line to a Johnny Carson joke. That was because of John Bassett, and his ability to run a first-class operation that did things the right way. No one laughed at a team that won 17 of 20 games, had not experienced the kind of profound financial problems that other teams had, and drew good crowds to every game.

When Chris Hemmeter and his supporters decided to give the Wiffle another shot in '75, they knew they needed Bassett. Hemmeter probably wished he could clone the Memphis owner, but at least one Bassett was better than no Bassett at all.

Bassett was certainly willing to give the WFL another shot, but it seemed as if he wasn't sure if he wanted to give Memphis another go at it. In January, Bassett announced he was considering making a deal to move the entire Memphis franchise lock, stock and jock to New Haven, Connecticut. Either the deal fell through, or Bassett ws just blowing smoke, but either way in the end the team stayed in Tennessee. It does, however, make one wonder what the team would have been called in New Haven—the "Eastmen?"

With Bassett back in the fold, prospects looked good for Memphis for 1975. Their 17-and-3 record in '74 was the best in the league. John McVay was back as head coach, as was most of his staff. Many of the top players—White, Huarte, Spencer, Harvey, Marshall, Shirk, Mikolajczyk, and Wallace—were all back. Memphis also added safety Rickie Harris from the defunct Florida franchise.

Most important of all, the so-called Big Three—Csonka, Warfield and Kiick—were poised to join the team. The sky seemed to be the limit for Memphis. In the immortal words of one of Memphis' most famous residents, "The King," it looked like the Grizzlies were ready to "TCB baby"—Take Care of Business.

But it looked like some people in the league wanted to mess in the Grizzlies' business. Hemmeter said that some of the talent in the WFL needed to be distributed to some of the weaker franchises for the "good of the league." Since Memphis had been so successful and was still a viable franchise—unlike the majority of other prospective teams—they were a prime target.

That was why Eugene Pullano, the owner of Chicago, approached Bassett about having The Big Three play in Chicago to help build a franchise in the "Second City" that could be the flagship of the league. Bassett told Pullano thanks but no thanks, and was certainly not happy with what he considered the WFL's

efforts to gut his team for what they told him was the "good of the league."

"We already gave up a great football player (J.J. Jennings) for the benefit of the league," Bassett said bitterly in late July, "we gave up the best assistant coach (Bob Gibson) in the league to Charlotte and now we have to give up our General Manager (Leo Cahill) to Chicago."

Bassett said he would assume the business operation of the team until he could find a replacement for Cahill, who was sent to the Windy City in an effort by the league to prop up that struggling franchise.

"Gibson went to coach the Charlotte Hornets, and that was a tremendous loss to us," said John McVay, who assumed Cahill's general manager duties, "He talked to me about the Charlotte job—in this business, when you get an opportunity to be a head coach, you take it. I think Upton Bell had called Leo Cahill and John Bassett about hiring Gibby. We were so successful that you knew that someone was going to come and take someone away."

In an effort to replace Cahill, Bassett offered an executive position with the team to former ABA commissioner Mike Storen. Storen, who would be in charge of finances and promotion, had owned the ABA's Memphis franchise until it shifted to Baltimore in the spring of 1975. Two days after being offered the job, Storen accepted the position with the Grizzlies. At the press conference to announce his hiring, Storen said that John McVay, who had assumed Cahill's GM duties, would have "100% control of the football team," while he would direct the team's business affairs and have "complete 100% control over the secretaries."

"I think this is a real opportunity for me professionally," said Storen, who had given up plans to be a sports agent to take the job with the Grizzlies.

But like other Wiffle clubs, Memphis, despite how well they were run, was not completely immune from all the buffoonery, shenanigans and goings-on.

For one thing, there was the whole thing with the team having, and using, two nicknames, the Southmen and the Grizzlies. Now in the wacky world of the Wiffle this made perfect sense. Everywhere else on the planet, however, it didn't. Memphis players and fans definitely preferred Grizzlies. "I preferred Grizzlies," recalled quarterback Danny White, "I'm not sure what a Southman was."

The team also had a grizzly bear cub as its mascot. During one game the cub chewed through the insulation on a wire lying on the ground. When he got to the core he gave himself a terrific shock that threw him over on his back—and shorted out the stadium scoreboard for about 10 minutes.

When the team opened training camp, they got some bad news when Danny White had to undergo a hernia operation and would be lost until the first or second week of the regular season. That left the quarterbacking to veteran John Huarte and a pair of rookies, Lonnie Stewart and Tom Vosberg. Still, prospects looked good for another successful campaign.

But in the Grizzlies' exhibition opener, it was Anthony Davis who put on an exhibition, scoring 30 points as the Sun smashed Memphis 47-16. The Sun defenders were fired up all game long. "This is something we are going to have to expect all season," said Kiick, who gained just three yards in five carries. Csonka had just 12 yards in four carries, and Warfield caught just one pass for 28 yards. Hardly the earth-shattering results Memphis and WFL fans had been expecting. John Huarte threw two interceptions and rookie Lonnie Stewart threw three more and was trapped in the end zone for a safety.

"Our timing was off," grumbled McVay, "it was horrible. We had dropped passes, interceptions and fumbles. We did it all wrong tonight. I hope they all got it out of their systems."

Randy Covitz wrote in the *Press-Scimitar* that GM Leo Cahill wondered about how the loss to the Sun might affect the Grizzlies status of "invincibility." But after their second exhibition game, Covitz wrote that "the team must be wondering about its vulnerability." That's because Memphis lost its second straight preseason game, 7-0 in San Antonio.

The Grizzlies continued their inconsistent play, as Warfield dropped a touchdown pass in the end zone and Huarte completed just 7 of 24 passes and threw four interceptions. "That's a hard way to lose one," said McVay, "but we had our bright spots." One was the play of rookie outside linebacker Richard Miller from Ashland, who did so well that the Grizzlies cut the starter from 1974, Al Andrews, after the game. Another was Larry Csonka, who McVay said was "unquestionably the best back on the field." Zonk gained 90 yards in 20 carries and also caught three passes for 29 yards.

"I got tagged with a reputation of being a poor receiver at Miami," said Csonka, "but it was because nobody ever threw to me."

After the two disturbing losses, the Grizzlies—and The Big Three in particular—finally showed what they were capable of. Kiick ran for 115 yards in 30 carries, Csonka rushed for 73 yards and Warfield caught two touchdown passes as Memphis beat Shreveport, 14-7. "We did a good job of hanging in there and not pushing the panic button," said McVay, "We looked better in this game than in the two previous exhibitions, and

with another's weeks practice, we'll be ready for Jacksonville."

But they'd have to face Jacksonville without running back John Harvey, who was suspended indefinitely by the league on August 1st. Hemmeter and the WFL levied the suspension after Harvey had appeared before a U.S. magistrate earlier that day to waive removal proceedings on a federal drug indictment issued the previous week by a Laredo, Texas, grand jury.

Harvey was one of six people indicted on July 24th by a federal grand jury in Laredo, and was charged with conspiracy to possess and distribute heroin and cocaine, according to Bill Cochran, a special agent in charge of the D.E.A. office in Laredo. The indictment handed down by the grand jury alleged that a quantity of cocaine was delivered to Harvey in Austin, Texas in June.

Hemmeter said the suspension was effective immediately and would continue while the league and the Southmen continued to investigate Harvey's case. Bassett said that the indictment would not affect Harvey's status with the team. "Our findings at this point are not conclusive," Bassett said, "other than our belief in the most fundamental precept of American law that a man is innocent until proven guilty."

Harvey met with Bassett on July 31st to discuss the matter, and maintained his innocence of the charges. In mid-August, however, Harvey pled guilty to the charges and received a three-year suspended prison sentence and was placed on supervised probation for three years. On August 26th, the WFL lifted its suspension. But the bad publicity was the last thing the WFL needed.

The Grizzlies were further shorthanded when kicker Bob Etter suffered a hip injury that put his status for the regular season opener in doubt.

With Elvis, WFL President Chris Hemmeter, and 25,166 fans in attendance, the Grizzlies opened their season with a nail-biting 27-26 win over the Jacksonville Express. Kiick scored three touchdowns but was willing to share the spotlight with his teammates. "It's a shame people who score touchdowns get all the publicity," said Kiick, "I'm just happy to contribute to this football team."

"The line blew everything open," added Kiick, "and with Willie and Larry, it's like having two more pulling guards."

Csonka bulled for 99 yards, included 30 yards in five tries on the winning drive, but got a hard zonk on the head and sat out most of the second half. Willie Spencer added 77 yards and tallied two action points.

The defense did its part as well, stopping an action point try by Jacksonville at the end of the game that clinched the victory, and forcing two fumbles. Despite the fine work by the defense, Bassett was asked during the week if the team planned to sign three college standouts—defensive end Jimmy Webb of Mississippi State, and Nebraska linebackers Tom Ruud and Bob Nelson. "Those kind of players don't fit into the Hemmeter Plan this year," the owner said, quickly putting the kibosh to the rumors.

A week after the win over Jacksonville, 19,729 fans, once again including Elvis, who watched the game from a private suite in the press box, watched as Memphis rallied from an 11-0 halftime deficit to whip Charlotte, 23-11. Bassett said that cloudy skies and afternoon rain cost the team between 5,000 and 6,000 spectators.

Each member of The Big Three scored a touchdown as Memphis pulled out their second straight victory. Csonka piled up 112 yards on the ground and also grabbed a 10-yard pass from John Huarte for a touchdown. Huarte, who completed 8 of 18 passes and better yet was not intercepted, threw another 10-yard scoring pass to Warfield a few minutes later to put Memphis up for the first time, 15-11.

Warfield threw a scare into the team in the third quarter, when he left the field with his left arm hanging precariously from his shoulder. "My shoulder slipped out, it's a chronic thing with my left shoulder," said the future Hall-of-Famer, "Somebody grabbed it and I had to stop. It was hanging out and I was in pain."

The Grizzlies drove 51 yards in eight plays in the fourth quarter, with Kiick rushing 4 times for 26 yards, and this time it was Kiick who scored, from the 2-yard line.

"We got the touchdowns, but there were a lot of other guys involved," added Kiick, who celebrated his 29th birthday with a postgame cake in the locker room, "The line did its usual helluva job."

After his erratic performance in Week One, Huarte was booed when he was introduced. "I was oblivious to the boos," said the quarterback, "It happens to every player, every place, all the time."

Defensive tackle John LeHeup, scheduled to be married the next day, led the Grizzlies with 11 tackles and also intercepted a pass.

The Grizzlies had a week off, and then traveled to Philadelphia on the 23rd for a game against the Bell, who were 1-and-2 and coming off a 10-3 loss to Shreveport.

The Grizzlies struggled all day, turning the ball over twice on interceptions and watching a wide-open Ed Marshall drop a sure touchdown catch in the end zone. Danny White, apparently on his own accord, tried to

Hawaiians were unable to score a touchdown and had to settle for a field goal. "Things are just different this year with our defense," offered linebacker Bob Lally, "We knew we could stop them from scoring a touchdown. Confidence was exuding in our huddle." The Grizzlies had six sacks, two by defensive end Cecil Pryor, and held The Hawaiians to just 54 yards on the ground.

The win put the Grizzlies record at 4-and-1. Only San Antonio was better in the league.

Memphis then won its fifth game of the season by cruising to a 34-23 victory over Shreveport. With Csonka and Tim Beamer both on the sidelines, and with Danny White making his first start of the season before 18,003 fans, Memphis played it conservatively, throwing only 15 passes while Spencer (60 yards) and Kiick (52) chewed up yardage and the clock.

On their first possession, the Grizzlies marched 73 yards on 10 plays, all of them on the ground. Spencer capped the drive with an 8-yard scoring run and the Grizzlies were literally off and running. "I don't get impatient the way I used to," said White, "As long as the running game was going, I stuck with it."

But on their next possession, White went to the air, completing passes to Marshall, Kiick and tight end Gary Shirk to put the ball on the one, from where Kiick scored his ninth touchdown of the season.

"I figured they'd be looking to stop our running game, so I went with the quick passes downfield," said White.

White then hit Marshall for a 17-yard scoring pass and Ricky Townsend nailed a 41-yard field goal to make it 26-0 at the half, and for all intents and purposes that was the ballgame.

"I wanted to throw more," said White, "but after we got that big lead, we worked on ball control and I didn't get a chance to do what I wanted in the second half."

After playing three straight and five of their first six games at home, Memphis took to the road, flying to Portland to face the Thunder on September 21st. Although the team was winning, John McVay decided to put injured veteran kicker Bob Etter on waivers and kept the barefooted rookie Townsend.

McVay was rewarded for his decision to keep Townsend when he hit on a team-record three field goals to help the Grizzlies beat Portland 16-3 in Civic Stadium before 14,818 fans, Portland's best crowd of the season. "What I saw that I liked out there was three field goals," said McVay.

It was the first time in its history that Memphis was held to only one touchdown in a game, and that touchdown was set up by the defense. Defensive end Tom Beckman picked up a fumble and barreled 57 yards to the one-yard line, and Kiick scored from there to make it 13-3 at the half.

The defense also got a big play from Bill Stevenson, who blocked a Portland field goal try in the fourth quarter. Townsend then added another field goal to put the final at 16-3. "These three help my confidence," said Townsend, "Now I have the position by myself. I know I'll be here every day unless I screw up."

His teammates had confidence in him too. "It sure helps to have a guy like Townsend," said Danny White, "You know you're going to get three points regardless of what happens."

Barefootin' . . .

Townsend's first field goal against Portland—a 41-yarder that tied the game at 3—came under some protest. It seemed that according to WFL rules, a player on the field had to be in full uniform—including socks. So the next time Townsend, who preferred to kick with his bare foot, came out to kick a field goal, he had on his orange sock. But no shoe. "That's the first I ever heard of that," said Townsend.

The four-game winning streak had the Grizzlies in first place in the East. On Sunday September 28th they traveled to Texas to face the Western Division-leading San Antonio Wings. A crowd of 16,283 fans watched as the first half was all San Antonio. Memphis could manage only a 49-yard field goal by Townsend, which was the longest in team history, and the Wings built a 25-3 lead. Csonka fumbled at his own 12 to set up one San Antonio score.

In the second half, however, Memphis staged a comeback. With Csonka on the sidelines nursing a chronic pulled groin, the Grizzlies called on John Harvey, and he responded by tossing a 49-yard halfback option pass to Ed Marshall and then crashing eight yards for another TD. But two last-gasp drives by the Grizzlies to tie the game fizzled, and the Memphis winning streak was over, 25-17.

With a week left in the WFL's Summer Season, the Grizzlies needed either a win over Southern California or a Birmingham loss at Hawaii to clinch the Eastern Division Summer title. A crowd of 18,129 was on hand in Memorial Stadium to watch, and they saw a classic, the kind of exciting game the Wiffle founders had promised the football public back in early 1974.

"We went back to the basics and to what works best for us," stated White. Sure enough, the Grizzlies,

minus an injured Larry Csonka, jumped to a 15-0 lead on a one-yard run by Willie Spencer and White's 11-yard pass to Paul Warfield.

But the second quarter belonged to the Sun and Anthony Davis, who ran for two scores, caught a pass for another and tacked on two action points. Southern California took a 23-15 into the half. "The second quarter was one of the worst we ever had," Danny White said later, "We were just lazy."

A field goal on their first possession of the third quarter increased the Sun's lead to 26-15. But during the drive, Davis left the game with an ankle bruise. Without A.D., the Sun attack ground to a halt.

The Grizzlies proceeded to stage a comeback, scoring two quick touchdowns in less than five minutes on a 5-yard pass from White to Marshall and a one-yard run by Harvey. Suddenly, much to the delight of the Memphis crowd, the Grizzlies had regained the lead, 30-26. McVay called the comeback "the best one a team has ever given me in all my years of coaching."

Memphis held on to its slim margin until there was 1:45 left in the game. Then, on a fourth down and nine, the Sun's Mike Ernst hit Terry Lindsey with a 22-yard scoring pass to give Southern California a 33-30 lead.

Now it was time for the Grizzlies to come back again, and they did, marching steadily down the field as the seconds ticked off the clock. "We were thinking touchdown all the way down," said McVay, "I don't know how we could have possibly made it through an overtime." The coach was referring to each team's sidelines, which looked like Valley Forge.

Finally, with 32 seconds left in the game, White spotted Marshall in the end zone for a 17-yard touchdown that gave the Grizzlies a 37-33 victory and the Eastern Division Summer Season title and an automatic spot in the playoffs.

"This was my biggest game professionally," said White, "This was for a playoff spot, and we just had to comeback."

"It was for the championship," echoed Marshall.

The Grizzlies had never lost a regular season game at home when they welcomed the Vulcans to town on October 12th. It was one of those marquee matchups that happen only once or twice a season, and a good crowd of 20,192 was on hand at Memorial Stadium. Both Larry Csonka and Paul Warfield, who pulled a hamstring in practice two days before, were out but Memphis turned an interception by Andre Johnson into a touchdown when White connected with Ed Marshall for a 20-yard scoring strike to take a 7-0 first quarter lead.

The Grizzlies defense was practically helpless against the Vulcans' rushing attack, which would wind up gaining 232 yards. In the third quarter, Birmingham took control and scored on two short runs to take a 15-7 lead.

Memphis fought back gamely however. White hooked up with Marshall for another touchdown to draw within a point at 15-14, but Jim Kiick, battling a flu bug, was stopped short on the action point that would have tied it.

A field goal by Birmingham put them back up by four, and now Memphis needed a touchdown to win the game. They almost got it.

Well, they thought they had gotten it. The Grizzlies took over on their own 21 with 2:35 left. White used the clock to perfection, calmly driving his team downfield. He hit rookie wide receiver Charles Hobbs with a key pass and then connected with John Harvey for a 36 yard gain to the Birmingham 18. The drive seemed to stall but on fourth down and 13 from the 21, White dropped back and looked toward his favorite target, Ed Marshall. The pass was there but so were two Birmingham defenders, who hit Marshall just as the ball arrived. Marshall and the ball tumbled to the ground, but the official signaled touchdown.

Birmingham howled in protest, and the officials huddled. They then ruled the pass had been incomplete, which sent the Memphis faithful into a tizzy. Order was finally restored and the Vulcans proceeded to run out the clock.

The officials were whisked away in Shelby County police cars with John McVay in hot pursuit, pounding on the windows.

"Where are those dirty, rotten (expletives deleted)" McVay shouted as his fists hammered on the windows. "That's the damndest thing I've ever seen!"

"In all my years I have been in football," McVay said later in the locker room, "I have never seen a call like that. When you catch a pass in the end zone, all you have to do is have possession and Eddie had possession."

"The films will show it. I had it," added Marshall, "I had it. The guy hit me from the top but I was in the end zone and letting the ball down when the officials said touchdown."

"If he's bobbling the ball, that's something else," stated White, "But it was obvious to me Ed had possession."

At least six times the replay was shown on the telecast back to Birmingham. In the press box the consensus was split, with the Birmingham contingent saying it was incomplete while the Memphis bunch thought it was a touchdown.

"There's no question he caught the ball," said McVay, "All he needed was possession and it's a touchdown. We'll have to protest it."

But would there be a league to file a protest with? One day after the controversial ending in Memphis, the league owners were called to an emergency meeting in New York to discuss what future, if any, the Wiffle had. Reports circulated that the league was finished. But at least one executive seemed to think that no matter what happened in New York, the two clubs would indeed play their rematch in Birmingham on the 19th.

"He's [*Jack Gotta*] the boss at Birmingham, and I'm the boss at Memphis," John Bassett had proclaimed outside the dressing rooms at Memorial Stadium after the game, "and by gosh, we're gonna play that game. After the game we had here, it'd be a shame not to let these two outstanding teams play again."

But despite Bassett's exhortations—which made him sound like a Mid-South Wrestling promoter—there was a good chance it was time to stick a fork in the league, and that it was done. Attendance figures had not been up to expectations. At the beginning of the season, Hemmeter had said the league needed 17,000 people a game to make it. But attendance was hovering around 13,000 league-wide, and that was simply not going to cut it. Hemmeter said from New York before the meeting that the league was attempting to avoid what he called the "ultimate negative,' which would be shutting down the Wiffle.

"We are exploring all directions to save the league," Hemmeter said, "We are exploring all alternatives. We just don't want the league to go down the tubes."

The closed-door meeting lasted two days. In the end, the Wiffle executives decided for better or worse to continue to operate with all ten teams. Rumors immediately spread that Bassett and the Grizzlies, along with Southern California, kicked in some cash to keep their less fortunate brethren afloat.

So the big rematch was on. Chris Hemmeter was in attendance and marveled at the crowd. "The crowd was fantastic and their reaction was great," said the President. But while the game drew a season-high 35,000 fans to Legion Field, it did not live up to the hype like the previous week's game had. Like so many sequels churned out by Hollywood, it just wasn't as good as the original.

In its 32-game history, Memphis had never been shut out, but they were in Birmingham, 21-0. It was also the first time an opponent had managed to beat Memphis twice in the same season.

"That was the first time I've ever been shut out in any game I've started," said Danny White.

Birmingham scored a quick touchdown, and then newcomer Tommy Campbell muffed the ensuing kickoff and the Vulcans capitalized for another touchdown to make it 14-0.

With his offense, which managed only five first downs, sputtering, McVay went to the bullpen and signaled in John Huarte to replace White. It was Huarte's first action since mid-September, but he didn't look a bit rusty. "We changed the blocking on some plays," said Huarte, "There was no magic to it, we just took it to them." Memphis moved like their fans had gotten used to see them move, marching from their own 20 to the Birmingham four, all of it on the ground. Nine times during the drive Huarte called Larry Csonka's number.

The drive reached the four-yard line but that was where Memphis outsmarted itself. They had changed the signals as well as the blocking schemes, and were snapping the ball on colors instead of numbers. On second and goal, Justin Canale, anticipating the snap, jumped too quickly and the ball was moved back five yards. "As soon as John called 'set,' I anticipated the color," said a despondent Canale, "I just screwed up, it was my fault."

The penalty took the starch out of the drive, and it stalled right there. Memphis went for the field goal, but a high snap threw off the timing of the play, and the 26-yard attempt drifted wide. It was as close as Memphis came to scoring.

"We just hurt ourselves," said McVay.

A couple days after the loss to Birmingham, the league owners met again to discuss the status of the league. The attendance figures at the four other games during the weekend of the 18th and 19th added together didn't add up to the crowd at Legion Field. It was not a good sign.

Sure enough on the 22nd, Chris Hemmeter announced to the press that the league was finished.

In the end, the $3 million Csonka-Kiick-Warfield triumvirate proved much more valuable as a publicity gimmick than anything else. While the presence of the trio had helped put fannies in the seats both at home and away games, the team had finished 7-and-5, meaning they had lost more games in '75 with The Big Three than they had in '74 without them. Csonka was hurt most of the season, Warfield caught fewer passes than Ed Marshall, and Kiick gained fewer yards than either John Harvey or Willie Spencer.

Memphis was considered one of the best-run WFL operations. Despite the fact that the league itself had died, the club remained very much alive and active.

No one had been laid off. The phones were still working, and ringing constantly. Coaches were still out signing players and scouting new recruits.

One day after the Wiffle folded up its tents, it was announced that both Memphis and Birmingham had applied for membership in the NFL.

"Whether or not our goals are realized," announced Bassett "will depend on a large extent on the people of Memphis, the powers who govern the National Football League and the players who so ably and capably represented us over the past two years and also to the economic factors, some of which have brought about the demise of the league.

"The Grizzlies regretted the decision by the governors of the World Football League to cease operations," continued Bassett, "It was a divided vote on the issue and I think it's important to know that Memphis voted to continue operations. We were in the minority. It is also important to note that in the two years we operated as a professional team in this community, we met all our financial obligations and obviously it is our intention to meet any obligations that are outstanding."

No less than Al Davis and Carroll Rosenbloom, two of the heaviest hitters in the NFL, indicated that the two would be given "serious consideration" for entry.

"I think John Bassett is an excellent individual," said Davis, "John Bassett had a commitment to excellence [*geez Al, where have we heard that before?*] in the World Football League and I admire that quality greatly.

"I am probably not the one who should be saying this, but it might be worthwhile to attend that meeting if you are from Memphis or Birmingham," continued Davis, referring to the NFL owners meeting scheduled for November 24th.

"I think that we would consider both of these cities seriously," said Rosenbloom, "We were, at one time, considering Memphis very strongly."

Chris Hemmeter recommended both cities for franchise consideration in a letter to Pete Rozelle. According to NFL spokesman Don Weiss, that "is technically all that's necessary for applying initially. All anyone needs to do is write and request the opportunity to make a presentation to commissioner Rozelle."

Bassett said that he still planned to file a formal application "within a few days." He added that December 20th had been set as a "deadline for a season ticket drive here to hopefully show that the people of Memphis truly believe in this city.

"That should be enough time for a real strong drive," Bassett continued, and added that commitments for 40,000 season tickets "are necessary as a positive indication of our willingness to make this go."

Bassett also announced the ownership structure his team would assume if granted a franchise. He was setting up a kind of "supergroup" of owners.

"There will be a significant contribution besides myself in terms of financing," Bassett said, "Included in the group would be John Bosacco, Sam Battistone, Bill Tatham and some of the people who were involved in Charlotte's WFL organization."

Bassett met with the Grizzly players and assured them he would know "something about any future this team could have in the NFL by January."

A week later, the club indeed started the campaign to sell 40,000 season tickets. The Memphis City Council unanimously approved an expansion for Memorial Stadium, from 50,164 seats to 72,000, which was considered a prerequisite for landing an NFL franchise. Stadium officials also indicated to Grizzly executive vice president Mike Storen that the lease approved two years ago if the city got an NFL franchise would still be honored.

"We were approached at a Grizzly luncheon two weeks ago by Mr. Storen at which time he told us the Grizzlies wanted to have a package in readiness to present to the NFL should the WFL fail to make it," said Nat Baxter, superintendent of the Fairgrounds, "He said the Grizzlies wanted to be ready within 24 hours after it happened so as to be at NFL headquarters with a package that contained a lease agreement acceptable to the NFL.

"This constitutes the same contract, the same lease agreement that was acceptable to the NFL two years ago. It is different in at least four aspects from the one granted the WFL, but I do not feel I am at liberty to discuss the differences."

Bassett was obviously very serious about getting into the NFL. He had long coveted owning an NFL club. He had applied for membership in the league way back in 1967—on behalf of Toronto—and had made no secret of his desire to join one of the world's most exclusive fraternities. Most of the Memphis players had signed new contracts for the 1976 season. They would also get a paycheck every Thursday.

In December of 1975, the Grizzlies held a season ticket event at the Mid-South Coliseum in Memphis in order to met the target of 40,000 season ticket pledges, calling it the "NFL-a-Thon."

The telethon was televised on Memphis TV station WMC. Performers that night included the Barclays, Charlie Rich, George Jones, Memphis Southmen Jazz Band and members of the Southmen football

team. Volunteers and Grizzlies personnel worked phone lines and the drive was a rousing success, ending up with 48,000 ticket pledges. The event was covered by CBS Sports and showcased on their NFL Today show.

The next day, the 17th, Bassett and Mike Storen flew to New York to lobby the NFL for an expansion team. They met with Pete Rozelle and the four-man NFL expansion Committee led by Steelers owner Dan Rooney.

"Reaching 40,000 was necessary. It's not smart business to play in front of 20,000," said Bassett. "But I feel good about everything. I feel excited about talking with the NFL people."

Bassett was told that it wasn't going to happen, but the Grizzlies' owner was undeterred and remained at NFL headquarters for six-and-a-half hours trying to convince the committee to award Memphis a team.

Bassett's persistence did some good, because he was able to walk away after forcing the NFL to take adding Memphis to the league to the 26 NFL owners for a formal vote. The Grizzlies would need 20 votes from the owners to overturn the Expansion Committee's decision. That vote would take place in March of 1976.

The season ticket drive was a rousing success, garnering 46,000 pledges.

On March 16th, 1976, however, despite all of the efforts by Bassett and Memphis city officials, the NFL voted to deny Memphis an expansion team for 1976.

Three days after the National Football League denied the Grizzlies an expansion team for '76, Bassett set free all 35 players that stayed under contract to the team in case the team was awarded a '76 NFL team.

When asked about Larry Csonka, Jim Kiick and Paul Warfield, Bassett was quoted "they're all free agents, just like Catfish Hunter."

John Bassett would also let go of his coaching staff and the office staff. A few staff members stayed on to help Bassett continue his fight to get Memphis an NFL expansion team.

On March 28th, 1976, 75 people showed up when Memphis auctioneer Virgil Nutt presided over the sale of some of the Grizzlies' equipment. One fan paid $1 for a striped sock worn by Jim Kiick. A young fan wearing a Dolphins' Number 39 jersey paid $10 for Kiick's pants.

Chris Drago of Memphis walked off with the biggest haul of the day, bidding on seven items for $430. He bought Paul Warfield's helmet for $60, Larry Csonka's jersey, helmet and shoes for a total of $235, and three items which belonged to Kiick, his jersey, helmet and shoes, for which he paid the sum of $135. Other items that were sold that day included Kiick's orange training shorts for five dollars and Warfield's cleats and socks for 27 bucks.

Only one complete uniform was purchased by a former Grizzly. Someone bought wide receiver Ed Marshall's uniform for him. Marshall said he decided to wear his Grizzlies' uniform to a Halloween party.

He won second prize for best costume.

In 1979, Bassett filed a lawsuit, Mid-South Grizzlies vs. NFL, against the National Football League claiming that the NFL violated the antitrust laws by refusing to admit his club to their league.

The court found in 1984 that the NFL "had not acquired or maintained its monopoly power unlawfully and that the refusal to expand to Memphis did not contribute to its maintenance." It further elaborated that "such refusal was actually pro-competitive because it left the Memphis area open to rival leagues." By the time the lawsuit had settled, Bassett had gone on to found and own the Tampa Bay Bandits of the United States Football League, while Memphis was granted a franchise called the Showboats in the same league. Because of all this, the case effectively became a moot point.

Whether called the Southmen or the Grizzlies, the Memphis team was one of the best-run franchises and top teams in the WFL. They won 24 of 32 games and were one of the league's best draws. They were one of the Wiffle's few success stories.

It's too bad that the league couldn't have found a few more owners with the money, guts and brains of John Bassett.

CHAPTER 27

For Whom the Bell Tolls . . . Part II

The Philadelphia Bell, 1975

"Then we got on a bus in Philadelphia and it broke down and we had to get out, carry our bags and hitchhike. Can you imagine the Eagles doing that?"

—Quarterback KING CORCORAN

After all the absolute crap that his team went through, put up with and created for itself in 1974, John Bosacco and the Bell amazed everyone when they announced that they were ready for another go-round with the wild and woolly WFL. But sure enough, there was Bosacco, joining in with the others in April of 1975, to announce that the Bell was one of the teams in the "New WFL."

Thanks to Bosacco's willingness—or masochism, depending on your viewpoint—the Bell was one of only two teams in the '75 Wiffle that had the same ownership.

After having to play in antiquated JFK in 1974, the Bell was able to secure a lease to use Franklin Field on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. It was old, too, but certainly not in the state of disrepair that JFK had been.

Rich Iannarella, business manager in 1974, returned to the front office as General Manager and managed to get quite a few players re-upped for another season in the City of Brotherly Love.

Vince Papale was back, as well as running backs John Land and Claude Watts, offensive guards Vern Winfield and Walt Hughes, centers Bob Paschall and Ron Kecman, and wide receivers Ron Holliday and Lenny Izzo. The King, Jim Corcoran, re-signed too, although he would be pushed at quarterback by Bob Davis, picked up from the defunct Florida Blazers franchise.

"I was pretty beat up from the WFL season," said Davis, "I wore a knee brace and I had strained my left knee during the season. I wasn't sure I wanted to play football anymore. Someone from the Philadelphia Bell contacted me about playing and I went up there and met with Bosacco in March. I liked the guy. He handled himself well, he was secure financially, had a good business, was a young guy and he wanted to develop the franchise. He signed me to a guaranteed contract with a small bonus."

On defense, linebacker Tim Rossovich, defensive tackle Doug Olson, and cornerback/kick returner Marv "Jet-A-Way" Pettaway were back.

Philadelphia also signed ex-Eagles wide receiver Ben Hawkins, as well as defensive end Louis Ross and defensive back Rod Foster from the Florida Blazers, Memphis running back J.J. Jennings, and defensive back Alvin Wyatt from Jacksonville.

As they signed players, the Bell knew one thing above all else: they needed a legitimate kicker. The team had tried Richie Szaro, Jack Simcsak, Dan Torzala, Don Warner, Jerry Warren, and even linebacker George Chatlos in an attempt to make field goals in 1974. None of them, however, were very good at it. The Bell contacted Bob Cooper, who had spent the '74 season on the Birmingham Americans' taxi squad except for one game when he was picked up by Portland.

"Philly came to me in the off season and said if I signed with them, they'd pay the money that Portland owed me—like $1200—and a $5000 bonus after the 12th game," remembered Cooper, "I knew they had all manner of kicking problems in '74, so I signed when they assured me they were committed to having both a kicker & a punter, and NOT a combo guy. That was my problem in '74; I didn't do both, but the rosters were small and several teams had two-way guys.

"I had a terrific year in Philly, I think I hit 12 of 17 field goal tries, and four in a game against San

Antonio," recalled Cooper, "and was one of the very few kickers in the league that could consistently kick off to the end zone."

The Bell also tried hard to sign former Eagles' quarterback Sonny Jurgensen. Bosacco obviously was enamored with the prospect of Jurgensen directing his Bell and throwing touchdowns on the old home field at Franklin, recreating his salad days with the Eagles. The 40-year-old signal caller had just played out his option with the Redskins and had hinted at retirement. Bosacco was undeterred and said he was willing to pay Jurgensen $1-million to join the Bell. When asked if he was concerned about Jurgensen's age, Bosacco said, "I don't think he's in any worse physical condition than Joe Namath," an obvious slam at Chicago and their efforts to sign Broadway Joe.

"I haven't even had a chance to speak with George Allen to see if I'm in the Redskin picture," said Jurgensen. The Redskins had recently signed NFL and WFL veteran Randy Johnson to join Billy Kilmer on the Redskins' depth chart.

In the end, Jurgensen considered the offer but decided to retire instead.

"I thanked him for his interest," said Jurgensen in reference to Bosacco, "But I think that it is not in the best interests of everyone to go back to Philadelphia and play. I am retiring in the best place I know."

Bosacco doubled and then even tripled the Bell's offer, but Jurgensen turned down both deals. Bosacco said that while he was "naturally disappointed that Sonny apparently will not be playing at Franklin Field this year, I think it is more important to note that Sonny's retirement is an even greater loss to the game of football."

After failing to lure Jurgensen to the City of Brotherly Love, Bosacco turned his sights to Ted Kwalick. The veteran tight end had signed a future contract with The Hawaiians in 1974, but that contract was ruled invalid because the owners of the team at the time of the signing were no longer associated with the team. Kwalick had offers from the 49ers and several other NFL teams, but in the end he cast his lot with Bosacco and the Bell on a three-year contract.

Kwalick said he looked upon the World Football League as a "land of opportunity."

"It came at the right time, "he said, "It gave jobs to a lot of good football players who couldn't get into the NFL. It also made jobs for coaches, trainers, assistants.

"I'm really impressed with the Bell people," he said, "The management has been great to me. I think I'll be all right here. A couple of my former teammates in San Francisco went to Hawaii and didn't get paid. I don't think that's going to happen to me. At least I hope not. I've got a family to support."

"I liked him a lot as a person and a player," said linebacker Younis Zubchevich in a recent interview, "He was a gentleman and a hell of a tight end."

The Bell opened their exhibition season at home against Southern California. J. K. McKay, son of the USC coach and a wide receiver who was accustomed to college crowds of close to 75,000, recalled the scene that greeted the Sun at Franklin Field before the game with the Bell. "When we came out to warm up, I looked around and there wasn't one person in the stands. Not *one*. I thought, 'My God, aren't we going to have anyone?' I think we ended up with 3,100 or something like that."

When asked about the attendance, head coach Ron Waller replied, "The crowd? At least it made a lot of noise." Despite the amount of noise they might have been able to make, the figures were ominous indeed: 2,614 people paid to get in. The Bell and Sun played before 57,000 empty seats.

"The thing is, it was paid," said general manager Rich Iannarella, trying like Waller to put a positive spin on it. But he didn't sound any more convincing than the coach.

The game started a trend of incredibly low attendance figures that would last the entire season. The team was competitive and had some legitimate stars—Kwalick, Jennings, Papale, Davis, Hawkins, Rossovich—but the Philadelphia fans just didn't seem to care. Nothing, or nobody, the team tried seemed to interest the city's football fans.

"Our big player was supposed to be Ted Kwalick," joked Vince Papale, "he might have drawn five or ten people."

Worse yet, the Bell fumbled the ball four times against the Sun. Quarterback Bob Davis hit on only 7 of 16 passes for just 34 yards, and Philadelphia lost, 23-8. Losing games so badly wasn't going to help attendance either.

Four days after the loss to Southern California, the team lost its coach.

There had been tension between Ron Waller and the front office ever since John Bosacco had stripped Waller of his general manager duties and given the title to Business Manager Rich Iannarella. Bosacco believed doing this would allow Waller to concentrate on his coaching duties. Waller, however, saw it as something else, and looked at it as a demotion of sorts.

Many people in the city and elsewhere thought that Waller's 9-and-11 mark in 1974 had been something of an underachievement, what with the team's

high-powered offense and all. So the pressure was on Waller to produce.

After the team's performance, or more importantly, lack thereof, in their exhibition season opener, Waller, upset by his "demotion" and discouraged as well by the prospect of rows and rows of empty seats in Franklin Field staring him in the face, "resigned under fire" as head coach. Waller sited "personal reasons" for his resignation. "I felt a sense of futility," Waller explained, "I thought, 'Jesus, why keep fighting, fighting, fighting?'"

Two of his assistants, Duane Putham and Joe Gavel, followed suit.

"It was a crazy, crazy situation," recalled Bob Davis. "I have never been a part of a team or heard of a team that would carry out a 'coup d'état' on their coach," recalled linebacker Younis Zubchevich recently. "Waller was like all the coaches I had grown up with. He was a tough task master who ran us into the ground. He did not pretend to be otherwise. He was not soft, did not tolerate soft and let us know it. For me, they [*coaches*] were all the same in those days. It was more discipline and execution rather than today's schemes. He got the job because he drove men to play football. It was not long into training camp, the New Jersey heat had no mercy and neither did Waller. He drove us in the ground. Many of the veterans began to grumble, got together and must have complained to the owner. Shortly afterwards, it was announced. There were no goodbyes. I do not think anyone saw Waller go."

Offensive line coach Joe Gardi was named interim head coach. Assisted by only Willie Wood, Gardi coached the Bell to a 30-21 win over the Portland Thunder. The Bell was not the only team experiencing attendance problems. Only 5,076 people were in Portland to watch Marv "Jet-A-Way" Pettaway score twice, on a punt return and an interception return, in the victory.

The euphoria of the win was tempered a bit by the loss of quarterback Bob Davis for what doctors said could be up to half the season with a broken jaw.

"Dave Costa, who used to play for the Denver Broncos, actually grabbed me, threw me to the turf, and I was injured," said Davis, "I had the ability to change the inflection in my voice and draw guys offside and I got him. On the second play, I did it again and I was looking the other way and he nailed me, he put my arms together and drove me to the turf and fractured the side of my face and jaw. The Bell trainers told me I would be out for 10 weeks, but then they developed a special 12-pound helmet that protected me and allowed me to return to play in three weeks."

Two days after the win, and only four days before the season opener, the Bell found a replacement for Waller. They named former Green Bay Packer Willie Wood as their new head coach, making him the first African-American head coach in pro football since Fritz Pollard in the 1920s. Wood picked ex-NFL and WFL running back Leroy Kelly, former Packer teammate Herb Adderley, Frank Gallagher, an offensive guard with the Bell in '74, and longtime NFL assistant Bill McPeak, as his assistants.

A Forgotten Trailblazer

So you think that Art Shell was the first black head coach in pro football since the 1920s when he was signed by the Raiders in 1989? Think again. Willie Wood beat Shell to the sidelines by a good 14 years, and he did it in the WFL. While the WFL did some weird and goofy things during the 22 months it existed, it did do some things right. One of the most important of these was opening up opportunities to black owners, black coaches and black quarterbacks. In 1975, a WFL team, the Philadelphia Bell, made headlines when they hired an African-American as their head coach. Unfortunately, because of all the wackiness that is associated with the WFL, this fact has been mostly forgotten. It happened in July of 1975, when pro football Hall-of-Famer Willie Wood was named head coach of the Bell, becoming the first black head coach in pro football since Fritz Pollard in the 1920s. After a Hall-of-Fame career with the Packers, Wood yearned to coach. He spoke with his former coach Vince Lombardi, who encouraged Wood to look into coaching. "We had a long talk in the mid 60s about what it takes to be a coach," said Wood, "The idea we eventually came to was that I would join him as an assistant after my playing days were over." But Lombardi's death in 1970 cancelled that deal, and instead Wood was contacted by the Chargers, so he quit his teaching job to join the staff in San Diego under head coach Tommy Prothro. He coached the Chargers defensive backfield for three years. "The experience was good," said Wood, "but if a person is going to broaden himself he has to work with people who are willing to give him more consideration and responsibility. Frankly, I didn't get that in San Diego." With three years experience, Wood felt he was ready for bigger and better things. He tried for an opening as defensive coordinator

with the Colts but was turned down. "I was set down because I didn't have the experience—and justifiably so," said Wood, "So I took the job in Philadelphia to get the experience as a coordinator. The reason I came here when (head coach) Ron (Waller) called me was to get more experience and to take on more responsibility by coordinating the defense. My goal is definitely to become a head coach." When Waller resigned, team owner John Bosacco, who figured that Wood's experience and expertise were just what the Bell needed, approached Wood about applying for the head coaching job. Wood did, and three days before the season opened, the Bell made it official: Willie Wood was the head coach. Wood's hiring even brought positive reactions from the NFL. "They couldn't have picked a better guy," said Buddy Young, NFL Hall-of-Famer and special assistant to NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle, "He's ready to do a job with experience. It was a great futuristic step. A lot of people only think former offensive players make good head coaches, but George Allen, Tom Landry and Dick Nolan were all defensive players." Wood said that coaching in the WFL brought its own challenges. "You find out real fast that over here (WFL) you've got to do more coaching because you're short of personnel (Wood's staff included only four assistants). Most head coaches in the NFL spend most of their time with the quarterback and that's the ideal situation, but this is not the ideal situation because we can't hire staff like you have in the NFL because of the budget." Despite his team's 2-and-4 record, Wood said he did not feel pressured or defeated. "Had I come to the NFL and lost two games there would be some question as to whether or not I had the ability to coach. But in the WFL you lose two games and they say you're rebuilding. So, in that sense, a lot of the pressure is taken off." Although Wood felt that the day an NFL team hired a black head coach was "just around the corner," it would be 14 years before the NFL had a black head coach—Art Shell—walking the sidelines. But while many fans remember Shell as the game's first black head coach, it was really Willie Wood, a forgotten trailblazer, who had blazed that trail in 1975.

The resignation of Waller and the hiring of Wood created a division within the Bell ranks. The only good thing about this was that the division was not along racial lines.

"These two factions developed," recalled Bob Davis. "There were the old Bell players who were loyal to Waller, and the new players, like Ted Kwalick, Ben Hawkins, J.J. Jennings and myself, those guys were on Wood's side and wanted me to start. With Waller gone, Wood brought in Bill McPeak to run the offense, which was an offense that I was more used to."

Jim "King" Corcoran, who had played under Waller for six of his 10 professional seasons and called his former coach "an offensive genius," was not happy to see his mentor go, and chafed about having to ride the bench .

"Some of the players threatened to quit when Wood came in," remembered John Land, "Ron was the coach and he ran the team. He was replaced by Wood, who is a good coach, but I felt that hurt the offense. Wood was defensive-minded. It took us a couple weeks to get used to that philosophy. Wood's philosophy was 'three yards and a cloud of dust.' He would drive the ball upfield one yard at a time."

Land recalled that Wood also made some personnel changes that affected the team.

"Wood brought in J.J. Jennings, a great runner with Memphis in 1974 who joined us for 1975," Land remembered, "Wood asked Claude (Watts) to retire and Claude refused, so Wood just replaced Claude with J.J. We also changed quarterbacks from Jimmy Corcoran to Bob Davis. Jimmy was flamboyant and Wood didn't respond to that type of behavior so Davis was in and it took the offense a while to adjust. Suddenly, we had a whole new backfield."

"The team up in Philadelphia wasn't as close knit as it was down in Memphis," J.J. Jennings recently told the web site wflnation.com, "There was a lot of turnover personnel wise so it was hard to get close to a lot of people on that team and then coming in from a different team it's tough to get close to some people. So I had some work to do up there. I didn't have that great of a season as a matter of fact.

"I don't know if I was prepared physically," Jennings went on. "When I came into training camp I think I was overweight. I had just gotten married and everything else so I could have prepared myself better and I blame myself for that. The team wasn't that good. Plus then again, this franchise went through a whole lot of turmoil. They fired their coach before the season started and then Willie Wood came in and took over."

The homeless and the hopeful . . .

Younis Zubchevich was what you might call an atypical typical WFL player. He was typical in

that, like other WFL players, he was an undersized—6', 215 pound—linebacker out of Rhode Island who went undrafted and unnoticed by the NFL in 1975. The Bell gave him a tryout. "I tried out for the Bell along with over 500 others," said Zubchevich in a recent interview, "They invited 127 of us, all free agents, essentially the homeless and the hopeful, to training camp. In 2 days they cut us to 27." Zubchevich survived every cut, however, and made the Bell. But he was atypical in that he was born in Derra, Syria and immigrated to America with his family as a child. At a young age, like so many other American boys, he discovered football. "I had been in America for 4 years living in Columbus Ohio," Zubchevich recalled recently, "and discovered Jim Brown and the Cleveland Browns. In 1964, I saw my first NFL game, the championship game between the Browns and Colts. That was it for a young immigrant boy." Zubchevich played Pop Warner football and at Bethlehem Center High in Fredericktown, Pennsylvania. At Rhode Island he made All-Yankee conference for the Rams. The NFL ignored him but the Bell gave him a chance, a chance for which Zubchevich was very grateful for. "Getting another year of playing a game we loved just one more time," said Zubchevich, echoing the sentiments of many WFL players.

The Bell continued to be the worst draw of the WFL in 1975. At the team's home opener against The Hawaiians, the management featured Henri La Mothe, a 71-year-old diver whose specialty was leaping from the top of a 40-foot ladder into a small portable pool. But only 2,732 people turned up for the dive and the game. Earlier in the day, the Eagles and Colts scrimmaged at Widener College before 4,800 people. The diver survived, and so did the Bell, 21-15, despite 155 rushing yards by Calvin Hill.

"I had run out of ideas on how to stop him. He's super. They might have won it if he played at the end," said Willie Wood.

Corcoran, playing in place of the injured Davis, completed 13 of 25 passes for 155 yards and two touchdowns. Cooper was successful on both his field goal tries. But it took a holding penalty on The Hawaiians that nullified a touchdown that finally won it for the Bell.

"He [*Bob Richards*] held all night," said Louis Ross, "We just finally got the call."

"It was about time we got a call," said Wood, "We had such good pressure from the defensive line that we just forced them to hold us at the last."

A week later, the Bell traveled to Birmingham to face the Vulcans. J.J. Jennings experienced firsthand some of the antics that went on with the characters on the Bell.

"A Bell player threw all the furniture out of the hotel window," Jennings recalled, "then called down to the front desk and said, 'We've been robbed!'" The Bell may not have been very successful and they experienced their share of problems, but they had fun doing it. "Philadelphia was more wild and crazy," said Jennings, "The team was a bit looser."

In a see-saw battle that saw the lead change hands four times, three times in the fourth quarter alone, the Bell lost in Birmingham on a last minute touchdown by the Vulcans and a fumble by John Land at midfield that ended Philadelphia's last threat.

Corcoran completed 12 of 19 passes but they went for only 106 yards, as he hit mainly dump-offs to his running backs in the flat. This was definitely not Corcoran's—or Waller's—type of offense. Corcoran was a riverboat gambler, a Brett Favre-type of quarterback, airing the ball out and not caring about completion percentages or the number of interceptions. Now he was in a ball-control offense and throwing the ball about half as much as he had in '74. And so far it wasn't working.

In Week Three, the Bell traveled to Shreveport to face the Steamer. The team struggled on offense, and trailed 8-3 at halftime. Corcoran started but completed only 7 of 18 passes and had two tosses picked off. Wood put Bob Davis in for Corcoran in the second half. "I made the quarterback change by design," said Wood, "we looked very raggedy the first half, and I thought it would give us some impetus. But we looked just as raggedy in the second."

The Steamer defense forced both quarterbacks to throw too late, too soon, and too often to be effective. Davis had a pass picked off in the end zone that killed one drive. "Davis underthrew the ball," said Wood, "We were working on Daryl Johnson in a zone, but he couldn't reach Ben Hawkins." Davis completed a mere 3 passes in 9 attempts and was also sacked twice. The Bell managed only 10 first downs and 228 yards in total offense and lost, 10-3.

Several days after the loss to Shreveport, Philadelphia cut wide receiver Lenny Izzo, activated wide receiver Vince Papale, and placed offensive guard Walt Hughes on the injured list. These were just the start of a series of personnel moves that the team would make to try to improve their fortunes.

Back home, Memphis and their "Big Three" came to town. Willie Wood said that the way to beat Memphis

"is to hold Larry Csonka to about 15 yards rushing, limit Paul Warfield to one catch, and pray that Jim Kiick doesn't play.

"No question they are tough," Wood went on, "They pose quite a defensive dilemma. You can talk in terms of Csonka being the greatest fullback in modern history, and Warfield could possibly be the greatest receiver. Kiick complements Csonka's running well, and Warfield is almost impossible to cover one-on-one."

Besides being a headache for defensive coaches in the WFL, the "Big Three" were signed with the intention of helping to put fannies in the seats, no matter where they played. On August 23rd, a beautiful night in Philadelphia, however, not even the three biggest stars in the WFL could coax people to watch the Bell. Only 5,051 fans bothered to show up to watch the Bell defeat the Grizzlies, 22-18. Philadelphia officials had to be unhappy about the low turnstile count, especially since the weather was gorgeous, the Phillies were not on TV from San Diego, and the game offered a very good matchup. The people also missed a fine game and a courageous performance by Bob Davis, who wore his 12-pound helmet to protect his broken cheekbone. In his first start of 1975, Davis completed 19 of 23 passes for 164 yards and a touchdown to Ben Hawkins. Davis also scored the winning touchdown himself on a one-yard sneak with 1:20 left on the clock to send Memphis to their first loss of the season.

"I still have to wear this ugly, freaking mask," Davis grinned after the game, displaying his helmet that was webbed with protective bars. "But the doctor's did a great job. They said I would be out eight weeks and I only missed three."

"Beating the best," yelled defensive end Len Pettigrew in the locker room, as Sly Stone's "Higher" blared from a radio nearby, "has got to give us some respectability."

"It's good for the league and it shows that even the best team is not unbeatable," Davis explained.

"It was a great game," Davis then added in summing things up perfectly, "but no one was there."

To some of the Bell players, however, the attendance figures didn't seem to be a factor. "I do not think anyone cared about the attendance figures," remembered Younis Zubchevich, "We were happy to play and compete. I would have played in an empty parking lot. It was not an issue."

To bolster their defense, the Bell activated linebacker Pete Woodward and to make room for him, waived guard Walt Hughes.

The Bell was involved in another great game a week later, a game that turned out to be the highest scoring game in the league's brief life and a game the Bell almost didn't make it to.

"We came out of our hotel rooms and there were two yellow school buses parked," said J.J. Jennings, "We all looked at each other, got on and took the buses to the stadium."

"We were in a yellow school bus, clunking along to the stadium to play the Sun," added King Corcoran, "My God, the bus shook and the back door was open. We tried to get inside the stadium, but the guard wouldn't let us past. He thought we were migrant workers—honest. Finally, Louis Ross, one of our defensive linemen, opened his shirt and showed the guard a Bell T shirt. Then, when we started to get out of the bus, the back door broke open and two or three players fell out like cartoon characters."

Although Bob Davis threw four touchdown passes, the Bell defense was practically helpless against the Sun, who built a 44-16 halftime lead and came out on top in a 58-39 barnburner.

This ends our broadcast day . . .

Back in the 70s, in what many people must think was the prehistoric era of television, there were no 24-hour stations. Most local stations played the national anthem around midnight or 2am, and then signed off the air. Night owls and insomniacs would have to be content staring at color bars or the station logo until around 6am when the Farm Report or Sunrise Semester would come on. On August 29th, 1975, Channel 29 in Philadelphia was airing the Bell game on the West Coast against the Southern California Sun. It was one of those wild and wooly offensive displays the WFL had promised their fans, and the two teams traded touchdowns all night. The game would end in a 58-39 victory for the Sun, but fans back in Philadelphia never saw the end of the contest. That's because at precisely 2am local time, with 10 minutes still left in the game, Channel 29 cut off the feed from the game, stating that it had a "prior commitment." What prior commitment was that? As it turned out, there was none. The station merely played the national anthem and signed off the air.

Philadelphia by now had the worst defense in the league, having already given up 994 yards rushing and 823 passing in five games. Something had to be done. After the defensive debacle in Anaheim, the Bell continued to move bodies on and off the roster.

Added were linebacker Skip Singletary, defensive end Willie Cullars, defensive back Rod Foster and running back Don Willingham; gone were linebackers Pete Woodward and Tom Costello. Placed on the injured list were defensive tackle Dennis Lozzi, running back Frank McGuigan, and defensive backs Gregg Butler and Reggie Berry.

"There was a lot of turnover on that team as far as personnel," said J. J. Jennings. "It was tough to get a squad where you have the same personnel there from week to week playing in the same positions."

In Charlotte, on September 6th, it was the offense's turn to look helpless. The Bell managed only 11 first downs and just 185 yards in total offense in losing to the Hornets, 10-0 in a rainstorm.

The game was the antithesis of what the WFL hierarchy had promised the pro football public. The teams combined for one touchdown, 10 points, 22 first downs, 64 passing yards on only 13 completions, and 360 yards in total offense.

The Bell's last chance was snuffed out when Corcoran's pass was intercepted at the Charlotte 2-yard line late in the game.

In an effort to improve his offense, Wood signed wide receiver / kick returner Howard Strickland.

Back home in Franklin Field, before another anemic crowd of 4,710 people, the Bell lost to Portland, a last-place team that had just fired its head coach, 25-10. Strickland returned two kickoffs for 53 yards and added 17 yards rushing, but otherwise the offense again was pathetic, gaining only 234 yards in total offense and turning the ball over seven times. After the game, Wood said the game made him "sick," and he continued moving players off and on the roster in an effort to find the right combinations. Signed were offensive tackle Steve Kinney, wide receiver Mark Wakefield and defensive back Alvin Wyatt. Gone were defensive end Willie Cullars, linebacker Ron Porter and defensive back Marv Pettaway.

Wood's health didn't improve when the Bell gave up a fourth quarter touchdown to lose in Jacksonville, 16-10. Bob Davis threw a touchdown pass to Ted Kwalick, but completed only 6 of 17 passes for 128 yards and two interceptions before being yanked for Corcoran in the second half. The Bell was able to reach the Jacksonville 5-yard line in the closing minute, but a fourth down running play came up short, just like the team did on the scoreboard. Philadelphia was now 2-and-6 and in last place in the Eastern Division.

Tensions due to the team's mediocre play boiled over in the locker room at halftime of the Jacksonville game. "Willie Wood comes in and started giving us hell," said John Land, "He's going on and giving us a real lashing. Then, he says to the guys, 'You're playing like a bunch of women . . . none of you are man enough to stand up to me even now!' Well, a guy on our special teams, Frank McGuigan, a tough player who made his reputation by breaking the wedge, stands up and says to Wood, 'I'll fight you now!' Wood just stood there. He didn't know how to react. McGuigan was angry; he was ready to fight him right there or in the parking lot—the entire locker room was deadly quiet. Then Jimmy [*Corcoran*] and I stood up and got between them. They were standing there staring at each other and we're all up on our feet now yelling, 'Frankie, sit down fool! What the hell's wrong with you?!' That was the craziest thing I ever saw."

"I had many interactions with Wood," recalled Younis Zubchevich, "I looked at him as an icon from the Packer days. My image of him remained. Some people should remain players. Some assistant coaches should remain assistant coaches. Head coaches are rare breeds and expose themselves for whom they are not. Willie Wood did that to himself immediately. He should have remained a player.

"He was not as rough as Waller on the practice field," Zubchevich continued, "That, I felt was his ticket to remain as the head coach. Where things broke down with him was in the film room. All of the years I had read about Lombardi running a film session, Willie Wood copied everything of Lombardi that I had read. He cursed at us, ridiculed us, and tried to shame us. There was a great deal of disaffection for his vulgarity in the film room. Somehow in all of those years with Lombardi, however, what was lost on him was not the tactic, but the man. Lombardi, the man, could do it. He understood when to push, when to praise, who to push and how much. He realized everyone was different though he treated all of them rough. Wood was vulgar to everyone. He stole and tried imposing Lombardi's tactics on all of us mistakenly believing it was his own identity. He had no identity as a head coach."

The team had now lost four games in a row and six of their last seven contests. Their season was going nowhere fast, and it also looked like Wood might be losing control of the team. Helped by a bye week, Wood kept trying to find the right players to plug into his lineup in an attempt to turn the Bell's season around. The Bell wound up using more players than any team in the league. Defensive end Joe Gonzales, defensive back Marion Reeves, quarterback Tom Shuman, offensive guard Ralph Perretta, center Steve Myers, wide receiver Jubilee Dunbar, and linebacker / tight end /

running back Steve Conley were brought on board. Released were wide receivers Darold Nogle and Mark Wakefield, offensive tackle Andy Tighe, defensive backs Reggie Berry and Frank "Funky" Polito and running back Frank McGuigan.

On October 3rd, the Bell had a team meeting (and probably spent some of the time introducing themselves to each other!). Besides the fact that they were in last place, the team was losing money hand over fist. In three home games, Philadelphia had averaged only 3,962 fans a game, the worst average in a league of bad attendance average figures. Something had to be done.

"It's almost like you're at an NFL practice," said Bob Davis, "It was not a good feeling. It's hard to get up for the game when there isn't anyone out there. After a big play you'd hear a clap. Probably my wife, my mother and father and a couple fans from the Jersey Shore. I would call the snap count and I could hear it echo through the stadium. It was very, very disheartening to see so many empty seats in the stadium."

So, on the 3rd of October, the day before their next game against San Antonio, management announced to the players that the team would need to reduce payroll to make it through the rest of the season. Ten players got up and immediately quit the team. The Bell had to activate ten new players later that day, only 24 hours before facing San Antonio at home.

Somehow, despite all the distractions, the Bell managed to beat San Antonio, 42-38, for their first win since August. Claude Watts, asked by his head coach to retire earlier in the season, scored three touchdowns and rushed for a game-high 111 yards. Bob Cooper kicked a record-tying four field goals (wasn't the WFL and its new rules supposed to cut down on field goals??), and termed it the "best field goal kicking I've done all year."

The Bell awarded Wood with the game ball. "I'm tickled to death," said the head coach.

Nobody associated with the Bell was tickled about the night's attendance. The game drew the fewest fans of the season, only 2,357 people, just 2,031 of which paid their way in. "The people who did come could've shared a program," wrote Bill Livingston in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

"Maybe the TV game (Ohio State and UCLA) had something to do with it," said Rich Iannarella, obviously struggling for answers, "Maybe people get accustomed to the TV during the day during the baseball playoffs and stay there." Iannarella also had to admit that many season ticket holders didn't even show up for the game.

During the week, Philadelphia released The King. Although he had lost his starting job to Bob Davis, it was unfortunate to see Corcoran go. He was never at a loss for words, and added some color to the sometimes black-and-white world of professional football. Teammates remembered him pulling up to training camp in his customized Lincoln Continental, rolling down the window and yelling through a bullhorn, "The King has arrived! The King has arrived!"

King Corcoran never viewed the WFL as a first-class operation. He recalled a story from the 1975 season.

"To save money we always seemed to arrive at a hotel at one in the morning and then play the game, leaving as soon as we showered," said The King, "Once we flew commercial to Portland and the flight back made eight stops. It was brutal. Then we got on a bus in Philadelphia and it broke down and we had to get out, carry our bags and hitchhike. Can you imagine the Eagles doing that?

"I made more money with the Pottstown Firebirds," Corcoran added, "and we practiced only three nights a week in that league."

The team's next game was in Hawaii, and the trip to and from Honolulu was evidence of the adventures the WFL experienced with air travel.

"We flew Philadelphia to LA and watched a kung fu movie, *Golden Needles* with Joe Don Baker," remembered assistant equipment manager Mike Fox, "After we took off from LA to Hawaii the new movie started . . . *Golden Needles*. I thought some of the players were going to kill the pilot for picking the movie! Like it was his choice."

"The flight back went to San Francisco, Phoenix, and then Philly," recalled kicker Bob Cooper, "Like a whole freakin' day and we got back in the wee hours of the morning. I was wiped out for a couple of days."

Not only did the team get whipped by the air travel, they also got whipped by The Hawaiians, 14-13, their seventh game in 10 contests. Cooper, who had kicked four field goals the week before, had one blocked at the end of the game that could have won it for the Bell.

Two days after the loss, the headline in the *Philadelphia Daily News* read "Has Bell Finally Tolled for WFL?"

Ultimately the Bell fell on such hard times that the team had to fire all its cheerleaders because it couldn't afford to pay them the $10 a game it had promised.

John Bosacco went to the league meeting on the 13th and did not know what to expect. Although Rich Iannarella refused to term the meeting critical—one of the few league officials to do so—there was the distinct possibility that the league might fold the team.

Although Bosacco stressed that the franchise was not in any financial danger—he was one of the few owners who paid his bills and his players consistently on time—the team had drawn an average of only 3,705 fans for their four home games. He did say before he departed Honolulu for New York that the team would not withdraw from the league, although he might ultimately have no choice in the matter. The franchise had also reportedly asked the University of Pennsylvania to relax some of the financial requirements for the club to lease Franklin Field.

"Is it a viable product in this city?" asked Rich Iannarella." In this city, I'm not so sure. We're now 10 weeks into the season and attendance, instead of getting better as I expected, has been reduced."

After a lot of discussion, and two days of closed doors meetings, the league voted to continue playing. There were rumors that Memphis and Southern California pitched in funds to prop up some of the more destitute clubs. The only thing they accomplished was that they merely delayed the inevitable.

On Saturday the 18th, the Bell hosted Charlotte in the rain before a season-low gathering of just 1,293 people, one of the smallest crowds in the history of the Wiffle. "We expected it in light of the rumors about folding spread in the national press," said Iannarella. Meanwhile, two blocks away, the city's minor-league hockey team, the Firebirds, was able to draw 2,100 fans to their game.

Claude Watts, subbing for an injured J.J. Jennings, rushed for a club record 136 yards as the Bell upset the Hornets, 18-10. That made three straight 100-yard games for Watts since he replaced Jennings in the lineup.

"Not bad, eh?" Watts grinned in the locker room, "I can't take credit for it, though. It was the offensive line. They've really matured."

"The old man just gets in there and does the job," said defensive end Don Ratliff, "It really inspired me."

"He loved football. Just loved it," remembered kicker Bob Cooper. "You could tell by the big smile on his face after he'd rumbled for a bunch of extra yards. I think he knew the WFL was his apex, and he made the absolute best of it. He was a super guy with a positive perspective on everything. I am honored to have been Claude's teammate."

Willie Wood, who had brought in Jennings and relegated Watts to the bench, had to admit, "It make us wonder about our selections."

On October 22nd, the league brass met yet again. This time, they knew it was time to throw in the towel. In a 6-to-4 vote, the league decided to terminate operations immediately. Bosacco voted with the majority to fold the league.

"I think as things started going bad," Davis said of Bosacco, "he asked himself, 'what am I doing here?'"

As a headline read, "When Nobody Shows, Show Can't Go On." The league knew it was true. And nowhere was that truer than Philadelphia, where the team's six home games—including their exhibition game—drew a *total*—that's *TOTAL*—of 18,653 fans. It doesn't take a financial genius to realize that you aren't going to make it on support—or a lack of support—like that.

Leave it to The King himself, Jim Corcoran, to best sum up the demise of the Wiffle.

"I saw the end coming two weeks before the league made it official," said The King, "How many ways can you cut up a gate from 3,200 paid attendance?"

CHAPTER 28

Thunderstruck

The Portland Thunder, 1975

"In Portland, you could give away 100,000 tickets and not get 10,000 fans to come."

—Thunder Director of Public Relations HUGH WYATT

In early 1975, despite the WFL being labeled as one of the biggest jokes in sports history, league President Chris Hemmeter and a few of the Wiffle's owners decided to try to reorganize the bankrupt league as a new corporation and start over again. A twelve-team league was put together for 1975, featuring eleven holdover cities from 1974, plus San Antonio. One of the holdovers was Portland.

Without the efforts of Greg Barton, who was one of the Portland Storm's quarterbacks in 1974, Portland wouldn't have gotten a second chance in the WFL. Barton, with the help of Storm administrative assistant J.B. Bishop, worked feverishly for five months to resurrect the Storm franchise and keep football in Portland. More than any one person, Barton toiled to preserve football in Oregon.

All during the off-season, he met with civic leaders and local business leaders to drum up interest in the team. He urged his Storm teammates to remain in the area and stay together as a unit. The fans of the city were supportive, but there were simply not enough of them. Barton plowed forward anyway, sometimes against the longest of odds, and for his efforts would be named the head coach of the team when it was indeed added to the WFL for 1975.

Thanks to Barton's efforts, Portland came back as the "Thunder," under new owners Richard V. Bayless, an attorney and holdover from the Storm ownership team, and William Tatham, a banker and real estate agent from Fresno, California. Tatham, a self-made millionaire with a deep love for sports, had been a big supporter of Fresno State athletics. "I want to own a football team," Tatham said at the time. He had possessed a Midas-touch over the years, turning many banking and real estate investments into profitable enterprises. However, that would not be the case with the Thunder. At a league meeting in Memphis on April 30th, Hemmeter officially announced that Portland had secured proper financing and had officially joined the league for 1975.

Dick Coury and Ron Mix, head coach and General Manger respectively for the Storm, had seen enough and bailed out for greener pastures. In their places were the much-traveled Bob Brodhead, who had spent eight years as vice president and treasurer of the Browns and also was GM for the Oilers for a time, as the new General Manager and Barton as head coach, at 28 the youngest head coach in football.

Brodhead said he named Barton head coach because of his "unique abilities to evaluate and place talent in its proper perspective, plus his philosophies and approach to the game are refreshing."

They would have to be, since because of budget restraints, Barton was able to hire only four assistants.

"Greg did a lot to keep the team together during the off season between '74 and the league's reorganization in 1975. I think that Bob Brodhead felt Greg deserved a shot at coaching the team for his efforts," remembered Hugh Wyatt, who was hired to be the team's Director of Public Relations, "I had decided not to return to Philadelphia. Bosacco had let a handful of people go. (Assistant Coach) Nick Cutro knew Bob Brodhead and I traveled out to Cleveland and liked what he had to say and some of his ideas about running a team. At the time he was being approached by groups in Jacksonville, San Antonio and Portland about running their teams. I told him that I thought Portland might be the best of the three. That winter

I went to the American Football Coaches Association meeting in Washington, D.C. and gave my resume to the coach of the Montreal Alouettes and he said he would look it over and get back to me. Well, a few weeks later, he calls me about coming to Montreal and being his Director of Player Personnel and I had to tell him that I had given my word to Bob Brodhead to join him in Portland."

Brodhead said that ten investors, eight of them local, had gambled on putting together a solid Portland franchise.

"They invested roughly $600,000," Brodhead recalled, "They can write it off as a business loss. Depending on what tax brackets they're in, they'll recoup 50 cents on the dollar."

Amazingly, a handful of players also returned, despite the broken contracts and broken promises of the previous year. These included 5'5" tailback Rufus Ferguson who had led Portland in rushing in '74; defensive end Bruce Bergey, defensive tackle Jerry Inman, tight end Bob Christiansen, wide receiver Jim Krieg, and defensive back / kick returner Joe Wylie. Running back Jim Evenson hopped on board from the CFL, while quarterback Don Horn jumped from the NFL, as did wide receiver Earl McCullouch.

McCullouch, who'd had a solid career with the Lions and Saints, catching 124 passes for 2,319 yards and 19 touchdowns, wasn't able to do much with the Thunder.

"I had surgeries my first three years with the team," said McCullouch, the 1968 Rookie of the Year with the Lions, "one on each foot and another removing chips from my knee. I inevitably started slowing down, and that took away my greatest asset. The accumulation of injuries eventually got me.

"Receivers were fair game in those days," he added. "They'd chop block us, cut our legs out from under us. And they were allowed to bump you all the way down field. They play under a different set of rules today."

Despite the best efforts of people like Brodhead, Barton, and Wyatt, however, in a lot of ways, the Thunder seemed to the fans of Portland to be nothing more than a chintzier knockoff of Robert Harris' discredited 1974 club. Not only was the name similar, but the Thunder kept the old team colors of Royal blue and Kelly green. The team then simply slapped new logo stickers on the Storm's old helmets to save money on equipment. The fans were not fooled and stayed away in droves. The good people of Portland had seen enough of the World Football League.

"Portland was tough," recalled Hugh Wyatt, "In Portland, you could give away 100,000 tickets and not get 10,000 fans to come. The North American Soccer League was getting geared up then and the Portland Timbers were drawing crowds of 30,000 to Civic Stadium, for the bargain basement price of $1.50 a head. I'll never forget one day in the newspaper there was a picture of our quarterback, Don Horn, under center, and it was shot with a telephoto lens and in huge letters above him was a sign that read, 'Welcome to Soccer City.' That was one of the dirtiest tricks that the media could have done to the team. The Trailblazers were no friends of ours. Their play-by-play guy was a color anchor on the local television station and he didn't give us a break."

But the Thunder forged ahead. In their exhibition season opener on July 12th in Birmingham, the Thunder led 9-0 at the half but fell apart in the second half, losing 25-9. The Thunder's quarterbacking triumvirate of Horn, Jim Ousley and Mike Biscotti completed only 10 of 26 passes and had three tosses picked off, one of them returned for a touchdown.

A little over two weeks later, Portland hosted Philadelphia in their second exhibition game. The first signs of financial trouble were evident when only 5,076 people showed up to see Portland lose to the Bell, 30-21, their second straight loss in the pre-season. Not only could the owners see that the team was doing badly on the field, they also knew they wouldn't last long drawing 5,000 folks a game.

Portland opened the '75 regular season in Anaheim against the Southern California Sun. The Thunder could not hold leads of 8-0 and 15-14 and wound up losing 21-15.

Tight end Bob Christiansen scored the game's first touchdown on a 12-yard pass from Don Horn, who played his first full game in four years and wound up 11 of 17 for 122 yards. But the Sun tallied twice on Mike Ernst scoring passes, the second a beautiful 65-yard bomb to Keith Denson. "That was the key play," said a disappointed Barton.

Portland did come back to briefly grab the lead in the third quarter. Defensive end Drew Taylor deflected an Ernst pass into the hands of linebacker Mike McConnell, who rumbled 22 yards to the Southern California 24. Six plays later, Ferguson ran it in from the six and the Thunder had the lead again, 15-14.

But in the fourth quarter, the Sun rolled downfield as Ernst scrambled for 39 yards and then Anthony Davis lobbed a halfback-option pass to tight end Chuck Bradley for another 16 yards. Greg Herd scored on the very next play and the Sun took the lead again and ultimately the game, 21-15.

A week later, on Saturday August 9th, the Thunder hosted The Hawaiians. With his offensive line banged up due to injuries, Barton had to start two rookies—Dave

Taylor and John Taylor—on the O-line, in place of Tony Bachmann, Alan Graf and Marv Roberts. Joe Wylie also replaced Tom Oberg at free safety.

A meager crowd—if you could call it that—of 7,709 turned out at Civic Stadium to greet the club for its regular season home opener. This figure was about half what the Storm had averaged a year earlier. It was not a good sign for football success in the Pacific Northwest.

The team also lost a heartbreaker, 25-24 to The Hawaiians. Don Horn hit tight end Bob Christiansen for a touchdown with 1:50 left, but Horn's action point pass to Rufus Ferguson that would have tied the game bounced off "The Roadrunner's" shoulder pad and fell harmlessly to earth. Errors like those killed the Thunder all afternoon, as both Horn and Ferguson fumbled twice, all of which The Hawaiians capitalized on for points.

"Rufus is a great player, everybody knows that," said Barton, "But he just had an off night."

It didn't help Portland's cause when an apparent touchdown by defensive tackle Billie Joe Winchester was disallowed by the officials.

The Thunder had one last shot, as they took over possession at their own 43 yard line with just 11 seconds remaining. Two desperation passes fell incomplete and then Warner tried what would have been a pro record 64-yard field goal, but it fell way short.

"It feels like we are snake bit or something," said Horn, "We couldn't get anything going at all on the ground, and that puts you in a hole right away."

The team still had not won a single game in 1975, and the losing continued in Chicago on the 16th. The Thunder fell behind 11-0, but rallied to tie the game at the end of regulation time. But another untimely error led to another loss, 25-18 in overtime.

Although he threw two interceptions, Don Horn completed 21 of 31 passes for 128 yards and a touchdown to Jim Thorpe to cut the deficit to 11-7 in the second quarter.

Chicago scored to go ahead 18-7, but Jim Evenson, who finished with a team-record and season-high 161 yards rushing, scored from the five and then added the action point to make it 18-15, Winds.

Later in the third quarter, Don Warner kicked a 28-yard field goal, and the game was tied, 18-all. The fourth quarter was scoreless, and the game went into overtime.

In overtime, Horn had a pass picked off and the error set up the winning touchdown as Pete Beathard, who had played for Portland in 1974, came back to haunt his old teammates by hitting John Gilliam to win it for Chicago.

The Thunder not only lost the game, but a pitiful crowd of 3,470 fans guaranteed that the team would lose money on the trip to the Windy City.

"After the game I stayed behind and wrote a recap of the game to send back to the 'Oregonian,' the local Portland newspaper," recalled Hugh Wyatt, "It was probably a couple hours after the game, and I had to walk down through the empty stadium and through the parking lot—it was eerie. We lost the game 25-18, but all I remember thinking I was going to get mugged on the way to my car."

Still 0-for-1975, Portland hosted Shreveport. If the attendance figure for the opener on August 9th had been disappointing, the one for this game had to be downright heartbreaking. Civic Stadium had only 6,576 people in it and the franchise was indeed starting to hurt for cash. The Thunder was beginning to think that they could die in the Pacific Northwest and no one would care.

The small crowd watched and then booed loudly as Shreveport's Paul Gipson returned the opening kickoff 73 yards for a touchdown and the Steamer took an early lead.

But Portland, backed into a corner and fighting for their collective lives, clawed their way back. The defense bent but didn't break, forcing the Steamer to go for field goals when they should have gotten touchdowns. Horn, who at one point completed nine straight passes, finished 17 of 24 for 210 yards and three touchdowns. Roadrunner Ferguson rushed for 131 yards and a touchdown on only 18 carries, and Jim Evenson added 78 yards on the ground. When it was over, the Thunder finally had their first win of the season, 33-24.

"It's only been some mental mistakes by our younger players that have hurt us," said Barton, "But we've stuck with them and they are learning and not making the mistakes anymore.

"We didn't push the panic button," Barton went on, "We could just as easily be 4-and-0, and we're going to win our share from now on."

"I'm so glad we finally won," said Horn.

Riding a one-game winning streak, Portland flew to San Antonio to play the Wings. There would be no two-game winning streak as the Thunder suffered an embarrassing 22-0 loss to San Antonio. Evenson and Ferguson, the Number One and Number Five rushers in the league respectively, were held to a record-tying low of only 21 yards on the ground. The fans in the stands walked farther than that to get their hot dogs. The team did not get one first down rushing the entire game, and managed just one sustained drive all night. "The team played terribly," said Wyatt.

"I've never been so embarrassed in all my life," said Greg Barton, after he watched his team get whitewashed, "We stunk up the place. We stunk on offense and we stunk on defense. I personally guarantee it will never happen again."

GM Bob Brodhead said only, "We're going to make some changes." He hinted that the team's performances had become "lackluster" and "inept," so it became obvious just what kind of changes Brodhead had in mind.

On September 2nd, the WFL booted the Chicago franchise out of the league. The news hit the WFL hard, as it had now lost its biggest market. Portland's brass tried to sound positive about the season. Owner William Tatham, in a phone interview on September 4th, stressed that despite the poor attendance figures so far, the Thunder was in it for the long haul. Tatham said that Portland did not and would not have a "Chicago situation," adding that he and his fellow investors would "back our team all the way."

"I feel no differently than any of the other eight investors," Tatham told the *Oregon Journal*. "Perplexed is the best way to describe my feelings over our attendance."

"We're averaging about 7,100 for our first two home games, and that, obviously, is below our projections," Tatham went on. "But Bob Brodhead told me that we'd have to come up with more capitalization before the end of the season, and I see that as no problem. We will be in the league for the full season."

In a separate interview, another Thunder investor, Dan Snider said, "A couple Chicago investors pulled out their money, but there's no way that would happen here. All our bills have been paid, the players are getting paid, and that's the way it will be when the season ends."

Tatham, the team's majority owner, went on to say that the team's investors had "projected that we would have an average of about 16,000 fans per game—just like last year. If so, we would about hold our own. But I personally don't have an answer on our current attendance. . . . Obviously we're concerned. But I have heard of no pressure from the league for us to do anything differently."

When the Chicago franchise was folded by the league, the Thunder picked up running back Bob Wyatt from the Winds. Two days later the team waived wide receiver Ken Matthews, who hadn't caught a pass all season, and linebacker Mike Popovich, and activated defensive tackle Billy Joe Winchester and offensive guard Tony Bachmann.

The changes didn't help. For the second straight week, Portland managed only 9 first downs. Their running game was somewhat better, but still gained only 75 yards. Don Horn threw two interceptions and was sacked three times and generally seemed confused by the Birmingham coverage schemes. "Lightn'n' Joe" Wylie scored on a beautiful 75-yard punt return but that was the only bright moment in an otherwise dull and dreary day for the Thunder. Birmingham won easily, 26-8.

After the game, Barton said, "Last week, I thought we were really ready but had a poor coaching job by us, but now I'm starting to believe that we will have to make some changes at 8 or 9 positions to upgrade our program."

Brodhead, however, countered by saying that no, continuity was needed, and a lot of player changes wouldn't help. It was the first sign of a clear philosophical rift between the two, and left little doubt in who would prevail.

On Sunday the 8th, Brodhead said he was "searching his soul for the means to come up with a solution to our problems. On Monday, he said, "I came to the conclusion that the patient needed major surgery."

"Lightn'n' Strikes . . ."

Like so many other WFL players, Joe Wylie had bounced around pro football for a couple years. After a successful college career at the University of Oklahoma, Wylie was the Number Four draft choice of the Raiders in 1972. He was cut by Oakland, signed and released by the Oilers and traded to the Jets where he played six exhibition games and was let go again. He joined the Storm on September 14th of 1974 and when he touched the ball for the very first time he returned a punt 46 yards for a touchdown. He finished the '74 season with 16 pass receptions for 209 yards, 19 punt returns for an 11.2 average, and 10 kickoffs for an average of 20.9 a pop. He was also the backup punter. Despite the team's financial problems, Wylie signed up with the Thunder for 1975. He became what defensive coordinator Dale Lindsey called "perhaps the most versatile player in the WFL, if not all of professional football." He was listed in the program as a running back / wide receiver / weak safety / strong safety. He even volunteered for public appearances, wearing a hat and apron and scooping ice cream for fans. "It rounds me out as a football player and doesn't bother my legs nearly as much," Wylie said about playing so many different positions, "They still feel fresh and have a lot of zip even though we've played almost half the season." His legs held up enough for him to finish the '75 season

with 1,156 combined rushing, receiving and return yards. The Portland fans—what precious few there were—began to call Wylie "Lightn'n" for his blazing speed and exciting returns. For most of the season a sign hung in Civic Stadium that read "Break One, Lightn'n' Joe!"

Two days after the loss to Birmingham dropped the Thunder's record to 1-and-5, Brodhead made his first major change—he fired Barton, and then replaced him on an interim basis.

"I have great regrets about letting an astute young man like Greg go," Brodhead announced, saying the firing was an 'unfortunate circumstance.' "His offensive outlook on the game at times approached genius."

His defensive outlook, however, approached a destination a little down the road from genius. When the Thunder were preparing to meet The Hawaiians, Barton gave reporters his assessment of Calvin Hill. "I know a lot about Calvin Hill," Barton explained, "He's a kind of big Anthony Davis. All we've got to do is buckle up for another game against Anthony Davis—except this week he's 45 pounds heavier. If Hill carries the ball 30 times against us, like he did in Philadelphia, we've got to be prepared for a physical game."

Odd? Yes. Genius? Not so much.

"Greg was too laid back to be a pro coach," recalled Hugh Wyatt, "We would wonder where he was at times, and we'd call him and he'd be home with his kids or something."

"In some respects, a lot of the players let Greg down a little bit," said offensive tackle Buzz Brazeau, "I wanted Greg to make it. But I feel something had to be done . . . I don't know why some of our guys aren't playing to their capacity. I just know if we pull together, we can do the job."

One day after canning Barton, Brodhead fired backfield coach Ed Dubaj, and then spoke with the team. "He laid it on the line," said Hugh Wyatt, "He told the team the future of the franchise lay in their hands, that it was up to them to turn the situation around."

Brodhead said he planned no wholesale changes, emphasizing he thought that the team he had could do well for the rest of the season.

"It was time for a change," Brodhead said, "We are a 1-and-5 football team and our last two showings have proved that something had to be done if we're going to turn this thing around.

"Greg is disappointed and told me he feels I'm making a mistake," Brodhead went on, "I'm firmly convinced that Greg will be an excellent head professional coach, but, unfortunately, time is against us here.

"We don't have that luxury," Brodhead continued, "We have about three games left in the first half of the season to get ready for the second half. A good second half and we can get in the playoffs."

In Brodhead's first game at the helm, the last-place Thunder surprised and defeated the Bell, 25-10 in Philadelphia.

"It was a lot of fun," said Brodhead, "It was almost as much fun as playing quarterback two winning seasons in Temple Stadium for Wayne Hardin."

Despite losing Jim Evenson early on with a sprained knee, the Thunder were able to do something it hadn't done in several weeks—establish their running game. Roadrunner Ferguson ran for 93 yards and 6'3" 210-pound rookie Ira Hammon added 67 yards in relief of Evenson.

"All the credit goes to the team and the assistant coaches," said Brodhead, "This football team proved the faith I had in it by achieving in every phase of the game: the special teams gave us good field position all evening long; the offense moved the ball; and the defense shut down Philadelphia's offense every time it was called on."

The Thunder had not scored an offensive touchdown in eight quarters, but it took them only six minutes to score one in Philadelphia. The Bell fumbled a punt that ex-Philadelphia linebacker Jonnie Knoble recovered on the Bell 17. Two plays later, Ferguson zoomed in from the 12 and the Thunder was on the board 7-0.

The Bell's next drive stalled and the Thunder took over on the Philadelphia 45. Horn engineered a quick drive that was helped when the Bell interfered with wide receiver Jim Thorpe. Ferguson took it over the right side into the end zone and added the action point to make it 15-0.

Things got better for the Thunder and worse for the Bell. Warner booted a 33-yard field goal, and then Tom Oberg intercepted a pass and Horn managed to complete a three-yard touchdown pass to Earl McCullouch who made the catch having defensive back Herb Lynch all over him. Portland led, 25-0 and wound up winners by a 25-10 score.

The defense, which had intercepted five passes in the first six games, intercepted four against the Bell, and also forced three fumbles. The defense was also the most physical it had been all season, hitting hard and often.

A week later, Portland hosted Memphis before 14,818 folks, the team's best crowd of the season. "This shows Portland can draw for football if you have a good attraction," said Brodhead. "No doubt Memphis is the best attraction in the league but it sure would

have been nice to win in front of our first decent crowd." But the Thunder lost, 16-3, to drop to 2-and-6, the worst record in the league.

"Our defense shut off their offense," said Brodhead. "But turnovers killed us. If we didn't give them such good field position, they wouldn't have had as many points as they did." The Thunder turned the ball over six times. One fumble led to a touchdown, and Portland also had a field goal try blocked.

The Thunder, however, were playing tougher football. "Memphis coach John McVay called us 'the best damned two-and-six team I've ever seen,'" said Hugh Wyatt.

Meanwhile, Brodhead was searching for a new coach. Word had it that the Thunder was considering Memphis assistant Jay Fry for their head coaching job. But Grizzlies owner John Bassett quickly put the kibosh to that idea.

"I have plans for Jay Fry and Portland is not included in those plans," Bassett stated emphatically, "Coach Fry is under contract to me and Portland is not going to get him. And that's final."

The Thunder then had a bye-week and on September 29th, Brodhead hired Joe Gardi to take over the coaching reins.

"His temperament and personality fit the team," Brodhead said, "He's a hard worker who will work these players' tails off."

Gardi had coached the offensive line for the Philadelphia Bell in 1974 and became the team's administrative consultant after Willie Wood replaced Ron Waller as head coach.

"I believe in coaching what you've got," said Gardi, "I'm not saying there won't be some changes, if necessary, but I'm prepared to coach these guys to be winners."

"When the Thunder came to Philadelphia I managed to get Joe and Bob together and Joe interviewed well and then was named the coach of the Thunder," remembered Hugh Wyatt, "Joe Gardi was a tough, organized, football coach. He was very disciplined. He quickly got the Thunder in shape and the team played much better after Joe came into the picture."

As he took over, Gardi said he planned on not making any wholesale changes. I'm not so sure that sticking with good people and coaching them isn't better than constantly breaking in new personnel," Gardi said. "Once I get the learning process out of the way, I foresee a turnaround like last year's."

When Gardi took over, however, he discovered he had two less players than he thought he had.

On the same day Gardi was hired, defensive tackle Dave Costa and offensive guard Marv Roberts quit the team over dissatisfaction with their pay and went home.

"I took a $36,000 cut in pay to come here," said Costa, "After what we've been through and what lies ahead, I decided it wasn't worth it . . . Playing 18 games for $9,000 doesn't make it."

"When I figured all my expenses in Portland—car, house, food, insurance—I decided it wasn't worth it," echoed Roberts.

"I'm not happy with either loss," said Gardi, "I wish I could have talked to them before they made their decisions."

Both players stressed they weren't leaving in response to Gardi being hired.

The team would soon begin playing better, but it couldn't seem to get its schedules straight.

"We were going to Jacksonville to play the Express," said Hugh Wyatt, "The team bus left the hotel without us. There's Bob and me, standing on the street, outside the hotel wondering where the hell everyone is. We had to take a cab to the airport to catch the flight."

They should have missed the plane and saved themselves the trouble. Portland had leads of 15-3 and 22-11, and outgained the Express 377 yards to 255, but couldn't hang on. A Jacksonville touchdown with six minutes left gave the Express a 32-29 win and Portland their seventh loss in nine games. Afterward, an unhappy Gardi said, "I don't want our players to be satisfied with playing Jacksonville close. That's crap!!"

Bob Wyatt, in his first substantial action since being picked up in the Chicago dispersal draft, rushed 16 times for 110 yards and a touchdown. Ferguson added 74 yards and another score. Lightn'n' Joe Wylie returned his third punt for a touchdown. But although the Thunder outgained the Express, untimely mistakes like 10 penalties doomed Portland again.

The Thunder now had the worst record in the league. Not only that, the money was running out due to low attendance both at home and on the road. In Jacksonville, there were only 8,119 people in the Gator Bowl.

Despite the low attendance figures and general sense of apathy about the WFL, two Portland players believed that the caliber of football in the Wiffle was not all *that* bad. Lightn'n' Joe Wylie, who had played previously with three NFL teams, said, "I felt the play in the WFL was high quality. It was good football. But some things were not NFL, that's for sure. The offenses in the WFL just were not as sophisticated. I played at Oakland and with the Jets, and their workouts were so developed. But in the WFL, how could you develop a system in one year when you're making so many changes? By midseason our playbooks were almost obsolete."

Jerry Inman, a defensive tackle with the Thunder, added, "I went to the old AFL with Denver in 1966, and I'd say the caliber of ball we played here in the WFL was better than what we played there in the first three years of the Denver franchise. The caliber of ball here was excellent."

But the fans still didn't seem to care. The citizens of Portland avoided Civic Stadium on Thunder game day like they would catch something if they entered the place.

Back home eight days after the loss in Jacksonville, the Thunder felt a definite lack of interest toward them on behalf of the city and its sports fans. Only 3,818 people were on hand, the smallest crowd in team history. Those few who bothered saw the home team face first place San Antonio. So far, the Wings had won all their home games and lost all their away games. That curious trend continued, as the Thunder, playing much better under Joe Gardi, beat San Antonio, 28-25 in overtime. Don Warner nailed a 25-yard field with 7:53 left in overtime to give the Thunder the win and send the small crowd into a near riot.

The Thunder defense was swarming and aggressive, and came up with the big plays when they needed to. One of those was an end zone interception by Clancy Oliver that ended a San Antonio drive late in the first half. The Thunder also had to overcome being flagged for an incredible 18 penalties for 191 yards. Portland did this in part by holding the Wings to 70 yards rushing and forcing seven turnovers.

That evening, one of Portland's finest restaurants was quiet. Business was slow, and a radio playing in the kitchen was the only noise.

A patron asked, "Who won the game today?"

The owner / chef stepped from the kitchen. "You mean the Thunder game?" he asked.

"Nooo, the World Series," the patron replied.

The Devil you say . . .

WFL teams were desperate to get fans to come out and see their games. Really desperate! Hugh Wyatt, the Director of Public Relations for the Thunder, told a WFL web site about a promotion they tried in Portland to encourage fans to attend Thunder games. "We tried a promotion," remembered Wyatt, "there was a guy named Ted Dawson that had a sports call-in show called 'Calling All Sports' and we had this guy who called the show and claimed that his name was 'Belial,' which means the devil, and he would say, 'I am Belial and I am calling from a commune in Utah and I am going to see to it that the Thunder wins all of the rest of its games this season.' Every night he would call and say this is the game I'm coming to. That night we had this guy drive a black car down a ramp at Civic Stadium and he got out of his car, and nobody knew that this was a stunt, and with gun powder or something he made a big circle and set the thing on fire and he went up into the press box and he sat in the press box, he's got a black robe and mask, and I'm going along with it and I'm saying, 'Excuse me sir, you can't be here, you'll have to leave,' and he's going, '*I am Belial.*' Down on the field, Dave Brown, our starting center, who was a devoted Christian, refused to play. He's saying, 'This guy's a witch, I don't want any part of this I'm not playing.' He managed to get some of the other players on his side and they boycotted the game—we had to get 'Belial' the hell out of there or the players weren't going to play."

By now—curiously just about the same time the Storm ran into serious trouble the year before—the Thunder franchise was on the verge of collapse. But a $280,000 line of credit extended by the other teams in the WFL ensured that the Thunder could survive until January of 1976.

The team would not have to accept the loan if their attendance improved, which was a very remote possibility. The club owners pitched in with another $80,000 to complete a total recapitalization of the franchise.

Brodhead denied that wealthy individuals lending the money had bought into the franchise or that the WFL itself would have any additional control in how the team was run because of the loans.

"The Thunder is totally owned by its original group of investors," Brodhead stressed.

"At a recent Governor's meeting, several WFL owners agreed to loan money in various amounts to the Portland team," said Joe Marshall, the league Vice President. "The largest amount still being invested in Portland is being put in by the Portland ownership group which still has clear title to the team.

"The loan is strictly a private matter between various individual owners," Marshall went on, "It is incorrect to say that the league is funding the Portland franchise."

Brodhead said the club needed extra money because the budget had been based on projected attendance figures of 17,000 at home and 20,000 on the road. The Thunder had drawn nowhere near those numbers, instead hovering around the 9,000 mark.

"What the league wants to see in Portland is some indication of improvement in attendance," Brodhead continued, "We don't need 20,000. If we could get 12,000, then 14,000, then that may be enough.

"If the Thunder leaves Portland," Brodhead went on, "I would be willing to bet professional football will never come back."

With the league struggling financially, the hierarchy called for a meeting of the league owners. The meeting was termed by some to be very "critical." On October 13th, the Wiffle owners met in New York City to decide how to proceed with the rest of the season. One possibility was to fold the Portland franchise. The Thunder's attendance figures were abysmal; only Philadelphia, another team that was possibly scheduled for the chopping block, was averaging worse crowds in the Wiffle. In New York, however, the owners decided to continue with all their teams intact.

The same day the owners met in New York just happened to be a payday for the Thunder. About a half dozen players were in the office when the announcement was made that the league was going to keep playing.

"These guys went crazy," said Hugh Wyatt, "They threw their arms up in the air, started hugging secretaries . . . We're just thrilled by this.

"We were scared," Wyatt continued, "but the longer the meetings went on, we felt there was more hope for Portland."

A day later there were reports of more hope for Portland. An Indiana millionaire came forward and said he wanted to help bail out the struggling Thunder.

Walter Dilbeck, President of Dilbeck and Associates, which had extensive real estate holdings throughout the world and who had given Spiro Agnew a job after he resigned as Vice President, called the *Portland Oregonian* on the 14th to ask how he could contact Thunder management.

"I saw in the papers that Portland was in trouble," said Dilbeck, "I want to talk with the owners of the Thunder and maybe work something out."

Dilbeck had played a major role in helping set up the World Baseball League in the late 1960s, but the venture never got off the ground. Dilbeck, however, said he still had contacts left over from that effort, and added that he could land a national television contract for the WFL within 10 days.

Dilbeck said he didn't want anything from the deal.

"I don't want any fee, and this is not a gimmick," said Dilbeck, "I know there is a problem right now with tight money. I don't have that problem."

Neither Brodhead nor majority owner William Tatham said they had heard from Dilbeck, although Tatham did say he would like to hear more.

Unfortunately, before Dilbeck could salvage the franchise or get the league a TV deal, the Wiffle folded. It was probably for the best anyway. In 1976, Dilbeck pled guilty to filing a false Federal income tax return for 1969 and served 60 days in jail.

On October 19th, the Thunder crushed Jacksonville, 30-13. Although the team cut ticket prices, the contest drew another sparse crowd of 8,713. It was their third win in five starts, and they were now 2-and-0 for the Fall Season and 2-and-1 under Joe Gardi. Rufus Ferguson rushed for 141 yards and a touchdown, and Joe Wylie returned a punt 78 yards for another score. The Thunder held Jacksonville to 75 yards rushing and forced three turnovers.

The players were so excited following the win that they wanted to carry Gardi off the field on their shoulders. But the coach, who fought an on-and-off battle with his weight, declined. "If they'd carried me off the field," the coach said later, "we'd be faced with six hernia operations!"

"The team played harder and was responding to Joe and his style," explained Hugh Wyatt, "The WFL had initiated this dual-season set up where we were 2-0 in the second half of the season. We started turning the fans around, and during our last game the players did a victory lap just like the local soccer team. People were starting to get excited."

But not excited enough, unfortunately. The Thunder and the rest of the league were in terrible shape and the writing was on the wall in bright red ink. The owners finally decided to cut their losses. After meeting for a couple of days in New York the World Football League shut down for good on October 22nd, 1975, without being able to complete its second season of play. The Thunder's downtown office closed shortly thereafter.

"We had I would guess, between $30,000 and $35,000 worth of debt locally," Brodhead said, "There's simply no money there to pay. Compared with the rest of the league, though, I'm really proud."

Brodhead guessed that Portland probably lost the least amount of money in the league, "yet we were second from lowest in attendance," he added.

"I don't really know if Portland can support a big time professional football team," Brodhead stated, "The attitude seems to be only support a winner, and every team can't win. This town has demonstrated it won't support anything but a winner."

If the WFL had completed the '75 season, "I think we would have paid for the sins of the past," Brodhead asserted. But with all the bizarre goings-on that occurred in 1974, he understood why the city gave the Thunder so little backing.

"I've probably had more experiences in six months in the World Football League," Brodhead said, "than all those years in the NFL."

CHAPTER 29

On a Wing and a Prayer

The San Antonio Wings, 1975

"Most of them (experts) thought we would go 0-and-20."

—NORM BEVAN, owner, San Antonio Wings

After losing the World Bowl to Birmingham in December of 1974, the Florida Blazers franchise was pretty much locked up tight by the courts. No one knew who owned them and no one seemed to want to step forward and claim they owned them.

Chris Hemmeter tried to schedule meetings with David Williams, Jr., the original investor, but he proved as elusive as the Roadrunner was to Wile E. Coyote.

Rommie Loudd, the team's Managing General Partner, was a little busy fighting extradition on drug charges from Boston, Massachusetts. In his efforts to raise money for the Blazers, it seemed that Loudd had agreed to connect a possible investor with some drugs. Unfortunately for Loudd, the "possible investor" in reality was an undercover police officer. Whoops!

The head coach, who was the WFL's Coach of the Year, had been hired away by the NFL and had taken his entire coaching staff and several players with him. Rumors circulated that what was left of the team was moving to either Akron, Ohio or Tulsa, Oklahoma.

In February of 1975, the Blazers suffered the indignity of having pieces of their franchise sold off at a court-ordered auction. Most of the stuff wound up being sold out of cardboard boxes like some bizarre yard sale.

To replace the Blazers franchise in the WFL, Hemmeter began searching for cities with investors willing to buy into the staggering WFL. He earned a ton of frequent flier miles by criss-crossing the country in his search for possible investors. One possibility was San Antonio, Texas, which for years had avidly supported the city's minor-league team, the Toros. But many people involved in the league thought San Antonio was much too small a market to support a Wiffle team.

San Antonio banker Norman Bevan felt otherwise. Bevan, a financier and investor, had an interest in bringing the WFL to the River City. He had business experience with Money Masters, Inc. (a corporation he founded) and Financial Management Inc. Bevan was also the vice president and board member of the North San Antonio chamber of commerce. He had roots and a family in the city. He knew that the citizens of San Antonio had rabidly and faithfully supported the minor league Toros. He also knew that Alamo Stadium, a 22,000-seat horseshoe-shaped facility built mostly out of limestone on the site of an abandoned rock quarry (hence the nickname, The Rock Pile), was available for use.

In a complicated deal—which would get even more complicated as the year went on—Bevan secured the franchise rights to the Florida Blazers (paying an undisclosed amount to the league), retained some of the player's contracts and gained league approval to transfer the franchise to San Antonio, Texas. In early March, the pages of the *San Antonio Light*, the local newspaper, announced the birth of a new San Antonio franchise. Perry Moss, a former coach with the old Orlando Panthers, was named the head coach.

The new team was given the rights to 20 of the Blazer players who had not signed elsewhere. In all, fifteen wound up playing in San Antonio: running backs Bill Gatti, Richard James, and Jim Strong; offensive linemen Rick Anthony, Tim Brannan, and Ron Maree; wide receiver Eddie Richardson; tight end

Luther Palmer; defensive linemen Dick Amman, John Ricca, and Paul Vellano; linebacker Billy Hobbs, and defensive backs Chuck Beatty, Rod Foster, and Billie Hayes. Two other former Florida players, Del Williams and Larry Grantham, were coaches with the team.

However, several former Blazers wanted nothing more to do with the WFL, and had headed for greener pastures. The league had to restock the team with an expansion draft. This brought them offensive tackle Jay Corey from The Hawaiians, center Tom Johnson and defensive back Jerry Davis from Jacksonville, quarterback Jim Ettinger from Memphis, defensive end Rick Cash from Philadelphia, and defensive tackle Butch Brezina from Birmingham. San Antonio also drafted running back Paul Miles from Memphis, but traded his rights to Southern California for quarterback Gary Valbuena. The draft results pleased head coach Perry Moss, who proclaimed that "we went from the newest to potentially one of the strongest teams in the league."

The new franchise was also able to sign NFL refugees Lonnie Warwick, Hugo Hollas, and Chris Morris. They even managed to sign a few of the former Toros—Bill Keresztury, Joe Lewallen, Bruce Bealor, and Johnny Mata. But their most important acquisition was a quarterback who had bounced around in the minor leagues with Indianapolis and Columbus, had been released by the Rams twice, and had been cut by the Chicago Fire in 1974. His name was Johnnie Walton.

Johnnie on the spot . . . but no one noticed . . .

Walton had been part of the trend in pro football in the 1960s and 70s that saw teams scouting, drafting and signing players from small colleges. Walton liked to point out that he played at a small school "but if you have skills I don't care where you come from, they will find you." In 1969, the Rams found and signed Walton to a free agent contract but when he didn't make the squad the Rams sent him to the Indianapolis Capitols of the Continental Football League. Walton started the season as a back-up to incumbent Frank Stavroff, a holdover from the 1968 Caps squad and a local product from the University of Indiana. Walton took over in midseason and led the Caps back to the playoffs, where they defeated the defending champion Orlando Panthers 27-7 in the semi-final. Walton's role was practically revolutionary in pro football in 1969, a time when black players on the Caps still had to deal with overt racism in Indianapolis. In an interview in 2009, Caps wide receiver Joe Wynns recalled being denied entrance to an Indianapolis carnival because of the color of his skin. The Caps met the San Antonio Toros at Bush Stadium on December 13th, 1969 to play for the Continental League championship. The game was a barn burner, with the Caps winning in sudden death overtime, 44-38. Walton, who was earlier named the Continental League's MVP for the 1969 season, became the first African-American quarterback to lead a football team to a professional title. Despite this, Walton had to spend the next three seasons on the Rams taxi squad without ever appearing in a regular season game. Walton remembers that the low point in his career probably came when he was playing for the Rams against the Oakland Raiders in a preseason game in 1971. He said he was crushed by 700 pounds of defensive linemen named Tom Keating and Ben Davidson, and he suffered a separated shoulder on the play. In 1973, he played minor league football with the Columbus Barons. That earned him a look-see with the Chicago Fire in 1974, but he was released before the season started (A move the Fire probably later regretted when starting quarterback Virgil Carter went out with an injury and the team never could find a decent replacement).

Of course, this being the WFL, and the remnants of old Florida Blazers, the new team couldn't get started without some controversy. In May of '75, Henry Hight, owner of the Toros, filed a $3-million lawsuit on behalf of the Toros and something called the Mid-America Football League against the WFL charging it violated his territory by granting a franchise to the city. The suit also charged that the Toro staff's right to work had been infringed upon, and that their players and coaches had been tampered with.

Needless to say, Hight was pissed. He had worked hard to keep the Toros running for seven years, during which time they won the vast majority of their games and became a legend in minor league football circles.

Hight stated that in March, he was asked by WFL representatives if he would sell the Toros to a group of San Antonio businessmen who were interested in bringing a WFL team to San Antonio. Hight said he did not want to stand in the way of progress or the thought of his players and coaches bettering themselves by joining the new club.

Hight negotiated terms with Bevan and William Harris, the new owners, and he was to receive $150,000 as well as eight percent of the WFL franchise in exchange for the Toros.

Hight said he was supposed to receive his money by the middle of April, but here it was the middle of May and he hadn't seen a red cent. He was given some murky explanation that he had not provided the new owners with a roster of his players. Therefore, Bevan and Harris said, the deal was off and they were bringing what was left of the Florida Blazers franchise to San Antonio instead, basically telling Hight that they were coming in whether he liked it to not.

"I've spent almost a decade building this franchise against very tough odds," said Hight, "Just look at the mortality rate of other minor league teams. Now, in just a few short months, these people are destroying everything I've done.

"We have charisma here," Hight went on, adding that if the Toros were forced to disband or leave town, "a thousand 'oles' and a bunch of dreams would go down the drain." Hight said he was suing the WFL and not Bevan's local franchise because he didn't believe the local WFL franchise had any money. "I want to see if they have all this money," Hight fumed.

Hight went on to say that the terms of the deal had changed over time, making him wary of the WFL. Soon after the WFL announced it was establishing a new team in San Antonio, Hight agreed to sell the Toros to Bevan for the aforementioned $150,000 and 8.3 per cent of the stock in the WFL team. Hight, however, said the deal was altered, with the price for the Toros being changed to $250,000 and no stock. The Toros' owner said Bevan then offered him $20,000 for the team. That offer, Hight said, made him certain the WFL franchise did not have any money. "I'm very leery of plans without money." he said. "They've got a plan but they don't have any dollars. I've seen a million plans go down the drain."

Hight promised that he would also attack the WFL in the form of competition, stating that if he can get a schedule together, the Toros would play again in the summer of 1975. "If there are two teams in San Antonio, it will do nothing but destroy one or the other, or both of them." Hight said.

Hight never did get the Toros organized for 1975, but continued fighting the WFL all season long.

Hight didn't feel he should've just given the Toros away and then forgotten the last seven years in which he had operated what was often called the most successful "minor league" franchise in the country. But Hight was not one to quit that easily. He saw himself as the little man who was being stepped on by the new kid on the block, that he was being pressured aside and in fact that he was being cheated.

What's more, Hight wasn't sure if the WFL was any better—or bigger—than he was.

"I've been around seven years and have met all my obligations," Hight demanded, "I have formed leagues and I've kept those leagues together. I've paid all my bills, not to mention the bills of many other teams. If that's not credibility, what is it?

"What has the WFL done to establish itself?" Hight continued, "Nothing, that's what. So far all the WFL has done is run up over $20 million in debts but for some reason y'all refer to them as 'major league.' I don't understand it!

"They figure I'm just a dumb country boy who won't fight back." Hight added bitterly.

It was evident at the press conference that Hight wasn't battling the WFL alone. At least three of the other six stockholders in the Toros were present to talk to reporters and they all supported the idea of a lawsuit, and certainly didn't seem interested in settling out of court. They made it clear that they would fight the WFL all the way.

Hight said he never really wanted to sell the Toros but that he agreed to do so "because I didn't want to be known as the guy who stopped this city from getting a major league football team." He was now convinced, however, that his Toros were as major league as the WFL and, in fact, he said it made him angry that the WFL was even considered in the same class as his team.

"The WFL people are mad at me for taking my fight to the public," Hight proclaimed, "They don't want to read about this mess in the newspapers. But hell, lots of people didn't want Watergate to reach the newspapers either."

When Hight's hassle with Bevan's team first developed it was simply a matter of if and how much the new team would pay for the Toros. But Hight said it was not that simple anymore.

"I'm after the league now," he warned, "I'm not leaving San Antonio and I'm not closing our doors without a fight."

Despite Hight's threats and his lawsuit, the WFL team continued with business as usual.

On May 13th, the new franchise announced that its official nickname was going to be the Wings. The team was named in honor of San Antonio's "50-year history as the center of military aviation." While keeping with the military theme, the Wings' colors were officially announced as Cloud Silver and Sky Blue. Norm

Bevan said that over 3,000 entries had been received in the contest, which lasted about one week. "This proves that what I have believed all along," said Bevan, "There is great interest among San Antonio and South Texas football fans for a major league team they can call their own.

"We intend to give them the finest team possible," Bevan promised. The winning entry was nominated by several fans and three of them tied (by earliest postmark) for the prize. The three would receive two season tickets each for San Antonio's 10-game home schedule for the season.

The winning name "was chosen by our entire staff," said Bevan. It was also announced that former Toro head coach Duncan McCauley had been hired as Director of Development. McCauley became the fourth former Toro staffer to join the WFL club. Earlier Roger Gill, a veteran Toro tight end, was named Director of Player Personnel and George Pasterchick and Bill Blankenship, both longtime Toro coaches, were named assistants for the Wings. Also attending the press conference was Charles Muench, a San Antonian who officially purchased the first season ticket for the 1975 season.

Stripped of his head coach and three other key members of his squad, Henry Hight remained defiant. "I'm still not quitting," he fumed, then added that he may ask former Houston Oiler head coach Sid Gillman "to come down and help us. He was impressed with our organization last year."

Hight was having difficulty delivering the official papers for the lawsuit to WFL President Chris Hemmeter, but was still undeterred. "I understand Mr. Hemmeter is going to be in San Antonio next week for a big press conference," Hight said, "Well, he just might have an uninvited guest at that press conference—would you believe a U.S. District Marshal?

"It's ridiculous for anyone to think that I would be willing to just pack and get out of town so these people won't have any problems," Hight went on, "I plan to see this lawsuit right up to the Supreme Court if necessary. I'm not going anywhere. One of those guys made the statement that I should go to Austin but there is no way I'm leaving San Antonio, not after living here for 44 years."

Hight added that he would like to ask Hemmeter just one question, "They talk so much about this great Hemmeter Plan," Hight grumbled, "but I have one question. Where in the Hemmeter Plan does it include escrowed money to cover a $3 million suit?"

The Toros' owner continued to be a thorn in the WFL's side as spring turned to summer. On June 3rd, Hight filed a "theft of trade secrets" allegation against one of his former employees, Bob Dickson, who now worked for KSAT-TV. Hight claimed Dickson turned over a list of season ticket holders to the new WFL team, and that the list was a trade secret worth $50,000. Dickson, who had sought a job with the Wings but didn't get one, admitted he did indeed pass the list on to the Wings but only after he discussed the matter with team official Harry Lander. Lander, however, denied that this had ever happened.

Hight's actions did little to endear the WFL or the Wings to the citizens of San Antonio. The city was behind Hight, supporting him like they had his team. This would become painfully obvious to the Wings—and the WFL—as time went on.

The Wings played their first exhibition game in Anaheim on July 5th against the Southern California Sun. The Wings surprised everybody—the Sun, the fans in attendance, the media and probably even themselves—by staying neck and neck with the defending Western Division champions for the entire game. Walton completed 16 passes for 250 yards and three touchdowns, but it was a scoring pass from backup Jim Ettinger to Donnie Shanklin that put the Wings into the lead, 31-29 in the fourth quarter. Pat Haden scored a late touchdown to beat San Antonio, but the Wings had acquitted themselves very well, recording five sacks and holding hotshot rookie Anthony Davis to 62 yards rushing and, better still, out of the end zone.

The Wings were then scheduled to host Memphis, but not until a Chief U. S. District Judge ruled that the game could go on.

Henry Hight, continuing his crusade against the WFL, had filed an injunction with the court, testifying during a four-hour hearing on July 9th that he would suffer irreparable damage if the new WFL team would be allowed to begin its season in San Antonio.

However, the Honorable Adrian Spears ruled that the WFL franchise would suffer more damage by his blocking the game than would the Toros, and also noted that Hight still had his $3-million lawsuit pending against the WFL for damages he said he had suffered.

Judge Spears, who called himself an "avid football fan," said that as a private individual he wished the two factions would reach an out-of-court settlement.

"It seems to me continuation of this fight could sound the death knell for pro football in San Antonio for some time to come," said Spears.

Allowed to play, the Wings put on another solid performance. Despite losing the ball five times, the Wings

beat the Grizzlies, 7-0, the only touchdown coming on a 79-yard punt return by ex-Toro J.V. Stokes. Larry Csonka ran for 90 yards, but the rest of the team managed only 27. The Wings intercepted five passes, including two each by Joe Womack and Billie Hayes. Linebacker Billy Hobbs had 13 tackles and an interception. After the game, the fans responded positively to the team, but they were not very impressed with the Wings' home field. Some of the 18,644 fans were asked of their impressions of Alamo Stadium, and came away with some negative reactions that may have ultimately played a part in the financial woes the team would suffer.

"I think they need a bigger one," said Bob Richards of the stadium, "They need to do something. This is atrocious." His wife said the seats were too close together and they needed back rests.

"This stadium just doesn't have the facilities to handle big crowds," added Gary Dempsey.

Another fan said the seating was okay but felt there were not enough rest rooms or concession stands. "They need more rest rooms, more concession stands, another quarterback and better referees," the fan said.

Parking problems at the stadium kept fans at home as well.

Despite the grumbling about the facilities, the fans had to be impressed with the team itself. They had lost late to Southern California and beaten Memphis, a favorite to win the World Bowl. The question now was, would the fans support the Wings as fervently as they had the Toros, with sellout after sellout?

That question was answered in the regular season opener a week later. The Wings faced Charlotte, and, while the people were enthusiastic, there were only 12,375 of them scattered around the stands. It was not a good sign.

The Wings did well on the field, as they would for much of the season. They defeated the Hornets, 27-10, forcing seven turnovers, the biggest one a fumble in the third quarter that halted a potential Charlotte scoring drive. "No doubt about it, I think the turning point was on that fumble," said Perry Moss, "If they score, they lead by something like 18-8 and we have to score twice. That was the turning point."

Billy Sadler, who rushed for 65 yards and scored two touchdowns, exclaimed, "Hey, the offensive line played a heckuva game tonight. Anyone could have run through those big holes I had tonight."

The defense gave some ground but not many points. "We bend, bend and bend, but never break," said Emery Hicks, "And it seems to work."

Billie Hayes, who had one of the interceptions, added, "You gotta give credit to our defensive line. Their quarterback had to run around all night."

The team gave a game ball to defensive end Dick Amman, who was back in Orlando, Florida with his wife. She had given birth to a son the day before the game. A few hours after he was born, however, the little boy died. Amman immediately flew home to be with his wife.

In attendance was President Hemmeter, who got a strange welcome to Alamo Stadium. Moments after he took his seat near the press box, Hemmeter was served with a subpoena by a U. S. Marshal.

Yep, you guessed it. Henry Hight was still around, haunting Hemmeter and the WFL, continuing his fight against the league. The Toros' owner had arranged for the Marshal to serve Hemmeter with the papers when he entered Alamo Stadium. The subpoena ordered Hemmeter to be present in San Antonio on the 31st to give a deposition in Hight's $3-million lawsuit against the league.

"In Hawaii we call this an 'aloha'" said Hemmeter, trying hard not to sound bitter.

Court was adjourned, however, on the 31st, with the proceedings held over until a later date.

On August 2nd, the Wings hosted Shreveport, and once again the lack of fans had to be disheartening. Although San Antonio had won its opener, the Rock Pile was less than half full, as this second game drew only 10,411 fans. It looked like there was indeed going to be trouble in "River City."

Despite the lack of fan support, the Wings played another good game, shutting down the Steamer, 19-3 after spotting them a 3-0 lead. San Antonio held Shreveport to just 11 first downs and only 230 yards in total offense, and put the clamps on Jim Nance, holding him to only 8 yards rushing. "This is the best defense I've ever played on," said defensive tackle Mark Brezina, "Lonnie Warwick is like a coach on the field." Warwick, a veteran linebacker signed by the Wings from the Vikings, had a game-high 12 tackles and also picked off a pass.

Meanwhile, Johnnie Walton hit on 17 of 34 passes for 258 yards and two long touchdowns, 60 yards to Donnie Joe Morris and 63 yards to Willie Frazier.

"I beat (John) Mallory on a deep post pattern," said Morris, "I'm concentrating on catching the ball before I start running now, and I think I can be one of the best receivers in the league before the year is over."

The rushing game punched holes in the Shreveport defense all day, totaling 165 yards, 61 by Billy Sadler and 57 by Jim Strong. "Our offensive line continues to

blow 'em out," said Sadler, "We've started to jell as an offense. Shreveport had a tough, hard-hitting defense, but we've got the best team in the league."

The success on the field was not translating to the box office. Bevan continued to work with the Chamber of Commerce and local agencies to promote the team in hopes of improving on the average of 11,000 fans that had attended the teams' first two games. He knew that they needed 20,000 a game to meet operating expenses, and not the 14,000 projected by the "Hemmeter Plan." The initial investment in bringing the team to San Antonio, and purchasing the player contracts of the Florida Blazers, caused an increase in attendance projections. Now that the WFL regular season was in full swing, Bevan and his investors were optimistic things would improve.

The next game raised the hopes of the front office as the Wings continued to be the surprise team of the '75 season by crushing Southern California by a score of 54-22. Better still, the game drew 21,000 fans, the best crowd of the season so far.

Bevan was overwhelmed by the stunning victory over Southern California and had nothing but praise for his young team. Not only did the Wings defeat the Western Division favorites but they dominated them with a tenacious defense that created turnovers, and an offense that capitalized with big scoring plays. The Wings set a league record with five rushing touchdowns, and were never really threatened as they moved their record to a surprising 3-and-0, best in the league. The Wings defense clamped down on Anthony Davis, holding him to 45 yards on the ground and keeping him from catching any passes. As the final seconds ticked off the Alamo Stadium scoreboard, Wings fans moved out of the stands and into the track that surrounded the field cheering wildly for their hometown heroes. Bevan looked on with admiration as the fans celebrated the Wings' most important victory of the young WFL season.

"We are considered to be one of the strongest franchises," Bevan told reporters.

"We hope to make the Wings a regional team. We hope to gain the support of San Antonio fans and also fans from the surrounding area. We want to give people something to be proud of. Our goal is to win a championship," added the owner.

He was also happy that the Wings had exceeded expectations. "Most of them (experts) thought we would go 0-and-20," claimed Bevan.

A week later, the Wings played their first road game of the season in Charlotte. The game started a distressing trend of the team being able to win all its games at home, but losing all the ones they played on the road. The Wings blew a 20-8 lead and missed a couple scoring opportunities in the third quarter, and lost to the Hornets, 27-20.

"When we should have put them away in the third period we got a couple of bad penalties that really hurt," lamented Coach Perry Moss.

In Week Five, the Wings flew to Florida to play the Express. The trend of losing on the road continued as the Wings lost to Jacksonville, 26-19 in overtime.

Early in the fourth quarter, with the game tied, at 16-all, the Wings had a first and goal at the Jacksonville seven. Two runs gained five yards, but on third-and-goal Bill Gatti lost a yard. On fourth down, Walton dropped back to pass but was sacked and the Wings had to turn the ball over.

Despite that failure, the Wings quieted the crowd when Luther Palmer kicked a 21-yard field goal with 2:09 left to put San Antonio up, 19-16. But on the ensuing drive, on a fourth-and-10 play, Express quarterback George Mira hit Witt Beckman, who broke a tackle and raced 29 yards to the San Antonio 16. Charlie Durkee came on and hit a 26-yard field goal with 32 seconds left in regulation, his record-tying fourth of the game, to tie it up and send it into overtime.

The Wings won the coin toss and elected to receive, but couldn't move the sticks and had to punt. Willie Jackson returned the punt all the way to the 31 and would have gone all the way if not for a diving, one-handed tackle by Wings' punter David Yaege.

Yaege's play merely delayed the inevitable. Five plays later, the Express scored to take it, 26-19.

On August 30th, San Antonio returned home to face Portland. With 12,197 fans on hand, Billy Sadler and Jim Strong both rushed for 100 yards and Johnnie Walton threw for two touchdowns as the Wings easily defeated the last-place Thunder, 22-0.

Walton hit on 13 of 22 passes for 176 yards and had six of his throws dropped by his receivers. "I've been around a lot of great quarterbacks in my career," said Perry Moss, "but I've never seen one pass that good. I don't remember him throwing a bad one."

"I've said it before and I'll say it again," added guard Richard Cheek, "Johnnie Walton is the best quarterback in this league or any other league for that matter."

Each member of the offensive line received a game ball after the contest. "This is the best blocking that I have seen since I've been in the pros," said Strong, who rushed for 106 yards on only 16 carries, "and I've been in the pros six years. It's a great tribute to the offensive line for two backs to gain over 100 yards in a game."

The win raised the team's record to 4-and-2, half-a-game behind Southern California. "We played like we should be playing," said Moss.

Despite the play on the field, Bevan continued to fret about the fan support, or lack thereof to be more precise, in San Antonio. The team had drawn 12,197 fans to the Portland game, giving the team an average attendance of 13,750—far short of the 20,000 the team had budgeted for. With no money coming in from television, the Wings stood to lose about $50,000 a week unless the crowds improved.

In early September, the Wings signed the Number One pick in the 1974 Wiffle draft, quarterback David Jaynes, to a contract. Jaynes had spurned the WFL at the time and signed with the Chiefs, but he played in only two games in '74 and was shipped to the Falcons for wide receiver Tom Geredine. He was then released. The Wings' picked him up to help back-up Johnnie Walton, but Jaynes lasted only about ten days before the Wings released him too. San Antonio then picked up Jerry Tagge, the former Nebraska quarterback who had been cut by the Packers.

Bevan tried to remain optimistic, since the Wings were set to host the powerful Southern California Sun in a continuation of what was turning out to be a strong rivalry. The Sun's only loss of the season had come at the hands of the Wings.

That week, the WFL folded the Chicago Winds franchise. The team had struggled both financially and on the field since they had failed to sign Joe Namath and Walter Payton.

"Revoking the Chicago franchise was preventative," said WFL President Chris Hemmeter, "Two of their principal investors withdrew and left them below the amount stipulated in our Constitution."

The league held a dispersal draft of the Chicago players. The Wings drafted wide receiver Margene Adkins, defensive linemen Chuck Bailey, Larry Jameson and Billie Line, running back Mark Kellar and defensive back Hal Phillips. Bailey, Jameson and Kellar signed with the Wings.

"I got shipped to San Antonio and I hated it there," said Kellar in an interview with a WFL web site, "I was honoring my contract. I signed a contract that was guaranteed by a letter of credit by a bank in Chicago, so I had to play, even though I didn't get a penny. I went to play for the Wings and didn't get paid for six weeks. They had a lot of talent. The last thing they needed there was a running back who wasn't getting paid. I was living in this little apartment they gave me and it was awful. I was living off of my signing bonus."

When Perry Moss told Kellar he had been traded to Charlotte, the running back balked at the idea. "My wife came down and after three weeks we went home," Kellar recalled, "When Moss told me [*that he'd been traded to the Hornets*], I said, 'I'm not showing up, I'm going home.'"

Hemmeter was in town before the Southern California game, saying he was there to give his deposition in regards to Hight's lawsuit. The president said he would like for reporters to be able to hear his testimony, which Hight was all in favor of. "That's fine with me," said the Toros' owner, "I have some good questions I'd like to ask him."

Hight was doomed to disappointment when the deposition was re-scheduled again. Hemmeter then took time to assure both the media and the fans that despite the revocation of the Chicago franchise the WFL "is not dead. In fact, we're just beginning."

The president talked to reporters about the Wings-Sun game. "I would be flabbergasted if the game is not a sellout," Hemmeter said, "I'm hoping this will be the game which sends this town into orbit. I think this game just might be the game of the year in the WFL. It will be the most exciting football game played anywhere in the country this weekend."

Norm Bevan added that he was also optimistic about the game. "I'm positive we will draw more than 20,000," said the owner, "We've solved most of our parking problems and we can handle much larger crowds now."

Whether the Sun was a rival or not, and despite the improved parking facilities, Bevan had to be disappointed when the fans continued to avoid Alamo Stadium like it had the plague. Only 10,547 diehard fans, less than half the capacity of the Rock Pile, watched the Wings clobber Southern California, 30-8 to improve their record to 5-and-2 and take over first place in the Western Division.

San Antonio dominated the action, and Karl O'Quinn, writing in the *San Antonio Express*, called it, "just a good ole country whippin.'" The Wings did not turn the ball over once and also forced three turnovers, intercepting a pass by Daryle Lamonica and recovering two fumbles by Anthony Davis, who continued his struggles against the San Antonio defense. San Antonio also sacked Pat Haden twice, one by Dick Amman and the other by Emery Hicks. Walton passed for 130 yards and three touchdowns, two to Willie Frazier and another long bomb to Donnie Joe Morris, a 63-yarder in the first quarter that opened the scoring. "I had been telling him (Walton) that I could beat the guy," said Morris after the game, "Sure

enough, he [*Sun defensive back Rudy Holmes*] took my fake and I beat him. It was a great throw by Johnnie."

The rushing attack was again solid, as Jim Strong (73 yards) and Billy Sadler (49) ably supported Walton's passing game.

After the game, head coach Perry Moss was happy about the win but also had some choice words for Sun defensive tackle Dave Roller, who had thrown an elbow at the head of Johnnie Walton late in the game. Moss had rushed onto the field looking like he was ready to take a swing at someone.

"He has done that time after time," Moss fumed, referring to Roller as a 'cheap-shot artist,' "He's gonna knock somebody's quarterback out of the game and all they're gonna get is five yards marked off.

"The guy should be expelled from the game when he does that," Moss continued, "Because he's done it plenty of other times."

The small crowds were disappointing to Bevan, and had become the subject of San Antonio's sports talk radio shows. Everyone, it seemed, had an opinion as to why the Wings weren't drawing.

Several days after the win over Southern California, a fan called a station claiming the reason the Wings' didn't draw was because "they cut [*linebacker*] Johnny Mata! That's why. Man, we love Mata. He's got thousands of fans here. When they got rid of him they got rid of a lot of us." The caller then screamed something about "dirty racists" and hung up. Some fans suggested getting rid of all the high-priced, well-known players, while others thought the team needed *more* high-priced, well-known players. Callers demanded lower ticket prices and urged the team sign more Mexican-American players. Still others thought the Wings would draw better if they signed holdout running back Warren McVea, who had starred at a local high school. The opinions continued to stream in. The ticket outlets were not organized. The seats in Alamo Stadium were too small. All the fans had different suggestions on how to fix the attendance problems, but they all agreed on one thing—they did enjoy the games.

A few days later, on September 10th, Bevan had to call a presser to flatly deny charges that the Wings were near bankruptcy. The owner told the press that the team would definitely finish the season and the WFL was sound. He denied charges of mismanagement and violating player contracts. These charges had been leveled by—who else?—Henry Hight, who had held his own press conference earlier in the day. He presented Harry Lander, who claimed he owned 25 percent of the Wings, and former Wings' quarterback Gary Valbuena, who said he had been placed on indefinite unpaid suspension. Valbuena, who earned the nickname "Cosmic Cowboy" for his tendency to wear black clothes, a black cowboy hat, and drive an orange Corvette, claimed his suspension was a sham concocted by the team for it to get out of not paying his $28,000 a year no-cut contract.

Bevan countered by saying that Lander was a terminated employee, and that Valbuena's suspension was valid and had been incurred because of his "attempts to create a team revolution."

Lander used the opportunity to urge Bevan to resign in order to save the Wings from collapse. "If Bevan doesn't step aside, the team will fold within two weeks," Lander stated, adding that the Wings' financial stability was "very, very rocky. They are operating on borrowed money and time is running out for them."

Lander went on to say that he had $400,000 ready to invest in the team, but added that "I cannot in all honesty commit that money as long as Bevan is in the picture." Bevan, meanwhile, responded by saying that the Wings owed no money and had operating capital totaling over $700,000.

"Mr. Lander's statements are totally false and he has put himself in imminent danger of a major lawsuit," said Bevan at his presser, "I'm going to get with my attorney immediately and review his unfounded charges."

While their front office spent several days leveling charges at each other, the Wings continued to prepare for their next game in Birmingham. The attitude among the players and coaches was to not worry about those involved in the mudslinging and to worry about playing football. When asked about Valbuena's situation, Perry Moss responded, "That's strictly management's territory. That is out of my responsibility." The only concern among the team members seemed to be the knee injury that had sidelined one of their better players, defensive tackle Joe Critchlow.

While an absolute juggernaut at home, the Wings continued their struggles on the road. Called the "sometimes-tough" San Antonio Wings by Norm MacLean in the *Pro Football Weekly*, they lost 33-24 in Birmingham.

The Wings just could not contain Birmingham quarterback Matthew Reed, who threw for two touchdowns and ran for another. "No excuses," Perry Moss said afterward, "Reed beat us all by himself. He had a good night. He's one helluva football player."

Billy Sadler put the Wings ahead 7-0 with a 1-yard touchdown run, but the Vulcans came back with 19 points in the second quarter and never trailed after that. San Antonio turned the ball over 4 times, and Walton was sacked 4 times. The Wings defense, the

league's best against the run going into the game, was practically helpless against the Birmingham rushing attack, as the Vulcans piled up 258 yards on the ground to control the ball and the game. Despite the loss, San Antonio maintained its half-game lead in the Western Division.

San Antonio returned home to host the third place Hawaiians, at 3-and-3 still breathing down the Wings' necks. But instead of a tense divisional match-up, the game turned into a rout. The Wings raced out to a 15-0 first quarter lead and ultimately ran way with a 30-11 win to move their record to 6-and-3 and, coupled with Southern California's loss to Shreveport, gave the team a virtual death grip on first place in the Western Division.

Walton passed for 250 yards and two touchdowns. One of them came on a fantastic catch by Eddie Richardson, who leaped with Willie Williams for the ball and, although Williams seemed to have better position, took it away, coming down with it in the end zone for the score. Jim Strong led all rushers with 82 yards on the ground. Richard James, subbing for a banged-up Billy Sadler, scored two touchdowns.

The Wings switched to a 3-4 defense and it worked like a charm although defensive end Nate Dorsey was ejected for fighting in the first half. The Wings held Sonny Sixkiller to just 17 completions in 40 attempts and intercepted him three times, and plugged up The Hawaiians' rushing game, yielding only 62 yards. "Hey, these guys are a good team!" said linebacker Billy Hobbs, "They have been scoring a lot of points on everybody. But we had a good, sound game plan. The 3-4 defense was simply because of personnel."

"We did it for two reasons," said Perry Moss. "From the films we noticed that Sixkiller was really hitting his passes, but he wasn't getting many blitzes. So we figured we needed to blitz him more tonight. You can blitz many ways from the 3-4 and we did.

"Plus," Moss added, "We were hurting for defensive linemen."

"It's nice to be in first place," added Hobbs, "But I just wish everybody in San Antonio would come out and watch us. Very, very few cities can say their team is in first place."

Very few cities could indeed have said they were in first place, and San Antonio was one of them. But their fans were not talking with their dollars, and despite the fact that the Wings were doing far better than anyone expected, had won every one of their home games so far, and were in first place, only 10,871 people had shown up for the game against The Hawaiians. The question by now had become, why had the Toros done so well at the box office, while the Wings now found themselves struggling and at times unable to fill half the seats in Alamo Stadium?

As mentioned before, dissatisfaction with the facilities could have been one reason, but the Toros had played in the same stadium and sold out every week. Hight's legal hassles with the Wings definitely put a bad taste in a lot of San Antonioans' mouths.

Then, in the April 2013 edition of San Antonio's *Action Magazine*, some clue to the problems the Wings faced came to light.

An article in the magazine reported that a reunion was being planned for the old Toro players and any fans and front office personnel who wanted to attend. Leo Seitz, an offensive guard for the Toros who ran a gym in the Helotes area, was organizing the event.

"The support we enjoyed back during the day was phenomenal," said Seitz.

"Everyone supported us," remembered Alfredo Avila, who was a star free-safety for the Toros, "Wherever we played, we filled it up. We used to have a lot of fun."

There were times when Toros' games went head-to-head against the NFL on Sunday afternoons. More than once, Alamo Stadium was filled to the brim with boisterous fans chanting "Ole, Toros!" Some of those games were broadcast on local television, and drew ratings the Dallas Cowboys and Houston Oilers would have been proud of.

The Toros were legendary, literally a local institution, and captured the hearts of San Antonians, winning four league championships and losing in two other championship games. In the Texas Football League in 1967 and '68, the Toros won 25 games and lost just one while winning the league title in both seasons. Some of the Toros made it to the NFL, and most of the team believed that the Toros could hold their own against many of the NFL teams at the time.

"In those days," Seitz recalled, "there were relatively few teams in the NFL, and there were literally hundreds of players out there who were big league material. At one point, we could have beaten the Washington Redskins. I know this for a fact. And we could have held our own with some of the others."

Avila, who had been originally drafted by the Redskins, remembered, "The caliber of players we had was great. We could have won in the NFL."

"I think we could give an NFL team a good game," said Henry Hight when *Sports Illustrated* spotlighted the team in 1971. The article, written by Tex Maule, even referred to the Toros as the "best football team in the country outside the NFL."

Hight kept the team solvent for nearly a decade despite some very long odds. As one league folded, he'd find another. Teams and leagues came and went, but the Toros were a constant.

As evidenced by his continued fight against the WFL, Hight was passionate and stubborn. He was innovative and opportunistic.

"I try all kinds of gimmicks to put some butts in those seats," said Hight. His players' payroll checks didn't include a whole lot of zeroes, but then again they didn't bounce, either. He had a dream of bringing an NFL franchise to San Antonio, a dream shared by many of the city's football fans. He flirted for a while with the Canadian Football League, but was rebuffed when he offered to play a quota of Canadians instead of a quota of Americans, as the CFL by-laws stated.

Hight overcame a lot, but the one thing he couldn't overcome was the "muscle" of the World Football League (Although how the unstable Wiffle, teetering as it was on the brink of extinction, could manage to "muscle" anybody is open to conjecture). When his plan to sell the Toros to Bevan's and Harris' WFL offer fell through, Hight watched the Wiffle move in any way with their own franchise, thereby basically kicking the Toros to the curb.

The WFL and the Wings then tried to fill the heads of the San Antonio fans with their hype and promises of a better brand of big-time football. The Wings, the WFL told the good people of San Antonio, were going to bring "major-league" football to their city.

But many of the fans saw the Wings as nothing more than latter-day carpetbaggers, who invaded the city, and then killed the beloved Toros and all the momentum the team had built in San Antonio over the past decade. While the Wings were a solid team, most of the local fans were just not going to accept them as their own.

Alfredo Avila remembered how the Wings and the WFL changed the football landscape in San Antonio. It's a bitter memory that he—and many of the city's fans—found hard to erase.

When asked recently how close San Antonio was to the NFL in those Toros years, Avila recalled, "If Henry (Hight) could have kept the team going instead of the Wings coming in, we would have been a lot closer than we are now."

The hard feelings about the loss of the Toros because of the Wings moving in were obvious then, and are just as obvious today.

A week after beating The Hawaiians, even the appearance of Memphis and the "Big Three" failed to sell out Alamo Stadium. Just 16,283 fans came out to see the first place Wings square off against the Grizzlies. Above the field, in the Alamo Stadium press box, amid the hum of conversation between newspaper reporters and the noise of the telegraph machines, Bevan quietly said to himself, "I had hoped for a better turnout for the game."

The Wings charged out to a 25-3 lead and held off the Grizzlies for a 25-17 win. Billy Sadler scored two touchdowns and Johnnie Walton peppered the Grizzlies secondary for 225 yards. Safety Larry Crowe, who had not practiced at all during the week because of a shoulder injury, returned six kicks for 188 yards. The victory gave San Antonio a record of 7-and-3, the summer season's Western Division championship, and an automatic spot in the playoffs.

"It's good to get this thing wrapped up this early," said Perry Moss, "We're going for the best record in the league now."

"We never dreamed that we'd get that far ahead in the game," Moss continued, "But if we didn't get so far ahead, we would have lost. I was scared to death the way Memphis was going near the end."

Nobody was happier about the win than linebacker Emery Hicks, who had been cast off by Memphis and traded to San Antonio in the off-season.

"I just wanted to let everyone know they let a good man go," said Hicks, who led the Wings with 8 tackles, after the game, "Last year I sat on the bench and wasn't happy. The trade suited me fine."

More good news for the Wings seemed to be just around the corner when it was announced that a group of investors was ready to pump $500,000 into the franchise.

But on October 4th, Norm Bevan met with the coaches and players in the team's Philadelphia hotel the morning of their game with the Bell. Bevan got up and told his team that drastic dollar reductions were needed before the following weekend's game in Portland. He said the team needed $400,000 in new investments to get through the end of the season.

President Chris Hemmeter had spent the previous week in San Antonio meeting with the potential new investors who had reportedly offered to put up $500,000 in new capital. But there was no firm commitment from the group, and Bevan went so far as to say, "The new group of investors has been postponed." Bevan tried to sound upbeat by adding, "It just takes time," but the Wings were running out of time.

The players were stunned and confused by the news. Some of them said they didn't expect any serious problems, and a lot of them refused to talk about it.

"I don't think it will hurt us," said linebacker Lonnie Warwick.

"It won't hurt us tonight," added Chuck Beatty, "We're going out to play and to win tonight. We have people back there (in San Antonio) watching us on TV, and it's our job to play football.

"Most of us went through this last year," Beatty continued, who had played for Florida in '74 and must have thought he was in the middle of a whole lot of déjà vu, "I think most of the players have a long range look at the league. We want it to succeed. Not many of the players are selfish." Beatty also hinted that he thought most of the Wings would indeed accept pay cuts.

"I don't want to talk about that at all," said Eddie Richardson, "I don't even want to discuss it."

"I don't really want to get into it," echoed Johnnie Walton, "Not until next week anyway. We have to think about a game now."

"I don't have any feelings about it right now," said Billy Sadler, "Right now I'm just concentrating on the game tonight. I don't want to think about it right now."

After getting the news from Bevan, the team went out and lost to Philadelphia, 42-38, their fourth straight loss on the road. The Wings fell behind 36-15 but staged a furious rally despite the lack of a strong rushing attack. Walton hit on 15 passes for 240 yards and four touchdowns, but had one picked off in the end zone with 1:30 left on the clock to seal the deal.

Bevan said the next day that the team had options on how to make reductions, and that the players would be given the opportunity to meet and work out the best solution. The Wings players, coaches and management said they would meet on Monday the 6th and Tuesday the 7th in an attempt to agree on some kind of idea on how exactly to cut back.

The Wings had a weekly payroll of $31,000, which was $12,000 over the WFL minimum.

"When the season started, we had the third lowest payroll in the league," said Bevan, "Now we have the third highest. Our approach to this is that it's a team problem. We intend to sit down with the team and discuss the problem.

"It depends on how much more capital we raise," Bevan went on. "We have to rely on our own resources. Existing cash won't carry us for 11 weeks, unless new capital comes in."

"It is a serious problem," said head coach Perry Moss, "and I don't know if there is an answer to it or not. When you start dealing with a pro athlete's money, it is a sore spot. They love the game, but they're out there for the money."

"We need to make a decision and get this out of the way so that we can start workouts Wednesday," added Moss.

On Wednesday, October 8th, the Wings voted to accept pay cuts of 25 to 40 percent to keep the team afloat.

Later that week the players voted on whether the team should go to Portland to play that weekend. They voted to go. Like they had done in Orlando, the ex-Blazers on the roster decided to continue playing despite the bleak outlook for both the team and the WFL.

As it turned out, they should have stayed home. A little less than 4,000 people were on hand to see the game. Not only that, the Wings turned the ball over seven times and lost in overtime to a team that had the worst record in the league. San Antonio trailed all day long until a 7-yard touchdown pass from Walton to Sadler put the Wings up 25-18 with 7:50 left. But Walton, who threw five picks on the day, had a pass intercepted that set up the tying touchdown by Portland. The Wings had a chance to win it in regulation but Luther Palmer's 45-yard field goal try with four seconds remaining drifted wide left. The Thunder won it on a field goal in overtime, and the Wings were still 0-for-1975 on the road.

Bevan traveled to New York City for an emergency meeting of the WFL's board of governors on the 13th. In New York, the league's ten owners debated a number of possibilities: disband the troubled league, fold the weak-drawing Portland and Philadelphia franchises, or deal with the plight of Bevan and his investors in San Antonio. In the end, the owners decided to continue playing as they were. It only delayed what many felt was the inevitable.

With no funding help in sight and somewhere around $500,000 in debt, Bevan's back was to the wall. His team traveled to Shreveport, but a sparse crowd of 8,581 folks in State Fair Stadium guaranteed another small paycheck for the team. Not only that, the Wings lost their sixth road game in a row, 41-31 to the Steamer. Shreveport jumped out to a 25-0 lead and then added 16 more points in the third quarter to take a 41-8 lead. The game was not as close as the final score indicated, as San Antonio scored 15 points with less than three minutes left. Quarterback Jerry Tagge, signed from the NFL waiver wire on September 16th, subbed for the injured Johnnie Walton and had a rude introduction to the WFL, hurling five interceptions. He hit on 18 of 34 passes for 265 yards, but the picks killed any chance the Wings might have had.

A couple days after the loss to the Steamer, Bevan was summoned to New York again. This time the

league governors were asked to vote to determine whether the league would continue and finish out the season. Bevan, knowing that his team was already assured a spot in the playoffs, voted to keep playing. But only three other teams voted the same way. On October 22nd, the WFL officially closed its doors. The Wings, and the rest of the Wiffle, didn't have a prayer.

"It just isn't feasible," Bevan said about the situation, "The cost would be too great."

Henry Hight, who had previously announced that he would re-organize the Mid-American Football League, told the press that anyone who had purchased Wings' season tickets could turn them in for an equivalent financial credit on San Antonio Toros tickets. Hight said he didn't want to see San Antonio fans be the losers. No wonder people supported his Toros and never warmed up to the Wings.

As to his lawsuit against the now defunct WFL, Hight said, "I'll make a cash settlement now. Make me an offer, whatever."

The local fans' response to the demise of the team spoke volumes. After the team folded, a local newspaper conducted man-on-the-street interviews to get a reaction about the Wings' franchise going out of business with the rest of the Wiffle. The number one answer?

"Who were the Wings?"

CHAPTER 30

Running Out of Steam . . . Part II

The Shreveport Steamer, 1975

"They not only wanted me to take a pay cut, they wanted me to play a couple games for nothing. I wouldn't do it, so they released me."

—STEVE HATCH, defensive back, Shreveport Steamer

Shreveport had taken the orphaned Houston Texans off the hands of Steve Arnold in September of '74. Although regarded as a small market that might not be able to support a pro football team, Shreveport and the surrounding area took to the new "Steamer" fairly quickly, easily outdrawing their predecessors in Houston. The crowds were larger and more enthusiastic.

John B. Atkins, Jr., a Shreveport banker and member of one of the city's oldest and foremost families, had organized a group of local investors that originally brought the Wiffle to Shreveport in 1974. A man with a genuine concern for the growth and development of his hometown, Atkins was a founding member of a group of 67 local businesspeople called the "Steamer Starters" which brought the team to Shreveport from Houston.

But would Atkins and his group take a flier on the WFL again when the league, described by its own president, Chris Hemmeter as "the greatest sports disaster in history," decided to give it another go in 1975? Atkins and his associates saw there was indeed still interest in the city.

To help gauge interest in the city, the WFL gave Atkins and the other local investors until March 10th to raise the needed money through a public stock sale to demonstrate community support.

On March 3rd, Bob Holladay, managing vice president of the Shreveport Steamer, Corp., announced that the franchise had raised the money needed to retain its membership in the league.

"This was a community effort," said Holladay, "a public subscription in which we sold stock in $100 and $2,500 lots."

Hemmeter traveled to Shreveport twice in February to help with the stock sale and guaranteed the investors that the city would have a position in the league if the needed money was raised.

"We really need to have a couple hundred thousand dollars to be competitive," added Holladay, "We are going to continue to sell all classes of stock for an indefinite period."

Once the group had raised the funds required for league membership, they then secured a lease to once again use State Fair Stadium. Thanks mainly to the efforts of Atkins and people like Holladay, the Steamer returned for the 1975 WFL season.

Al Lange, who had been the Executive Vice President for the Chicago Fire in 1974, was hired to be the GM and Business Manager. Tom Runnels, who had served as Assistant Director of Football Operations for the WFL in '74, was named the Steamer's P.R. Manager. Bill Byrne, another member of the Chicago Fire front office in '74, was hired as Player Personnel Director.

Marshall Taylor, who guided the team to a 4-and-4 record after he took over the reins from Jim Garrett in '74, returned as head coach. Offensive coordinator Bill Muir and defensive line coach Joe Robb both also returned, aided by player-coach John Mallory (defensive backs), and the recently retired Don Maynard (wide receivers) and Harry Theofiledes (quarterbacks). Tommy Brasher joined the club as defensive coordinator.

Quite a few of the older veterans from '74 had retired, but back for another go-round were linebackers Garland Boyette, Durfey Thompson and Bob Creech, tight end Donnie Davis, wide receivers Rick Eber, Doug Winslow and Johnny Odom, running backs Paul

Gipson, Virgil Robinson, Rocky Thompson and Jim Nance, offensive linemen Sam Holden, Clyde Williams and Joe Miller, defensive backs Richmond Flowers and Daryl Johnson, quarterback D.C. Nobles, and defensive linemen Willie Parker and Ronnie Rydalch.

The Steamer also added WFL veterans like linebacker Charlie Battle and defensive end Mike Walker (from Detroit), quarterbacks Edd Hargett (from The Hawaiians) and Bubba Wyche (from Chicago), and kicker / punter Dave Strock (from Florida).

The Steamer was able to sign rookie defensive end Robert Barber from Grambling, who had been the Number Two draft choice of the Steelers. "I would have liked to play in Pittsburgh, but I felt at home in Shreveport," said Barber, "They really came after me. I feel I can contribute to the Steamer in more ways than on the field which is important to me."

Shreveport also signed two rookies from Virginia Tech, wide receiver Ricky Scales and linebacker Kenny Lambert.

The Steamer also took a flyer on Rod Milburn, at the time the world record holder in the 120-yard hurdles. He impressed team officials in a private, hour-long workout on June 10th.

"He has soft hands and I like the way he relaxes once the ball is within reach," said Taylor, "We're interested in bringing him to camp." Quarterback Edd Hargett, who drove in from his Texas home to throw passes to the former Southern University star, was equally impressed.

"I'm glad I had the opportunity to come down here and try out," said Milburn, "I was looking forward to this and I was very pleased with the workout I had."

Milburn was in camp with the Rams in '73 but said he was "unable to come to terms with the NFL team," and left to join the International Track Association. He also talked to the Florida Blazers in '74 but could not agree to terms with them either.

Milburn, who had won the Olympic gold medal in the hurdles at Munch in 1972, said he thought he could stand up to the rigors of pro football.

"I know what it's like to be hit," said Milburn, "I was a pass receiver in high school and I played a year at Southern. I've been hit hard enough so I didn't know where I was. But it doesn't hurt until afterwards, so I'm not worried about it."

The Steamer did indeed invite Milburn to camp, but in the end they released him before the season started.

Hopes were high, but right from the start, however, both the "Boats" and the resurrected league struggled.

In April, quarterback Craig Morton, who had signed a future contract in '74 with the then-Texans, contended that a clause in the contract allowed him to terminate any agreement with the WFL if the Texans "ceased to do business." The Texans' shift to Shreveport in '74, in the view of Morton and his new team, the Giants, constituted such a breach. The WFL said it would allow Morton to remain with the Giants if he returned his signing bonus.

The Steamer was dealt another blow when both Wyche and Gipson were hurt in training camp and had to open the season on the injured reserve list.

Bad publicity, mirroring the kind that dogged the Wiffle in 1974, also reared its ugly head in the summer. There was, as a prime example, the case of Warren Gardner.

Newspapers from July 16th included a small blurb about wide receiver Rick Eber re-signing with the Steamer and word that the team had cut nine other players: defensive tackle John Houston, defensive backs Jim Booth, Rodney Hinton and Hamilton Brock, running backs Jerry Heston and Booker Washington, and wide receivers Ron Gibson, Johnny Washington and Warren Gardner, a 21-year-old rookie from Prairie View.

A couple days later, a Shreveport woman contacted the team saying a stranger had tried to sell her a ticket priced at $7.50 to the August 9th Steamer—Chicago game for $5. Police investigated and the perpetrator was identified when he was arrested in his Atlanta, Texas, home. It was none other than Warren Gardner, the 21-year-old wide receiver the team had just released three days before. Gardner was accused of stealing 1,600 game tickets worth an estimated $12,000. Police said Gardner planned to scalp the tickets on the street, and added that he would be charged with felony theft after extradition proceedings in Texas.

On Monday July 21st, the Steamer opened their exhibition season against Birmingham. A crowd of 13,264 watched the Steamer blow a 30-16 lead and lose 31-30. "We've learned a lot tonight," Taylor said afterward, "We learned that we've got to contain on third down. Our linebacking corps and our defensive line has some work to do. And we gave Birmingham too much time on the action points. Overall, though, I thought we performed well considering we went out there cold turkey against a team that had played twice already. We'll get better. We'll be able to play with people. I certainly feel we've got a football team."

"We didn't play one of our better games," said linebacker Garland Boyette, "But I'm not worried about it. It's just our first game."

A week later, 20,168 came out to State Fair to see Taylor's football team take on Memphis and their Big Three of Csonka, Kiick and Warfield. Before the game,

Taylor stressed that the game was important psychologically for the Steamer to prove that they could play with the best in the WFL. Shreveport put up a good defensive effort, but an erratic offense and two touchdown catches by Warfield, one of which was set up by a fumble by rookie Arthur James, doomed the Steamer, 14-7. The closeness of the score bolstered the Steamer's confidence.

"Now we know we can stay in their class," said Taylor, "Take away two plays by Warfield and its 7-0."

Shreveport opened its regular season in San Antonio on August 2nd, and the Wings stomped the Steamer, 19-3. San Antonio held Shreveport to 50 yards on the ground and harassed quarterback Edd Hargett all day. "They beat us," Marshall Taylor said, "San Antonio has a good team, a real good football team."

"They just whipped us," added Hargett, "They beat us in every phase of the game—offense, defense and specialty teams."

It was a frustrating evening for an offense that Jim Nance said should "be able to tell 'em where we're coming and still blow 'em out of the box."

"We didn't force the situation," said wide receiver Johnny Odom, 'We were playing cautious and they controlled the ball and that was about it."

"The worst thing we did was let them control the football," echoed linebacker Bob Creech, "If you keep giving them opportunity after opportunity, sooner or later they'll score."

Taylor put the team through two-a-day practices and looked for ways to improve the team's pitiful offense.

The extra work showed dividends as the Steamer whipped Chicago, 38-18 at home. Virgil Robinson rushed for 108 yards, and Hargett threw a touchdown pass to surprisingly effective rookie Ricky Scales.

Some people had laughed when Scales, a track star at Virginia Tech, decided he'd try football. But Abe Gibron and the Winds weren't laughing as Scales caught three passes for 82 yards and a touchdown.

"Ricky Scales can make things happen," said Taylor.

Mel Daniels' 77-yard interception return capped the afternoon. But only 10,661 fans were in attendance, and cornerback Daryl Johnson for one was tired of the negative attitude of the local press.

"We're a good football team," Johnson said, "but I have been reading nothing but negative things in the paper. Are they trying to run us out of town?"

The Steamer then ran Philadelphia out of town, beating them at home 10-3 with another superb defensive effort.

"We just lined up in a 4-3 and went at 'em," said defensive tackle Willie Parker.

"It was probably the simplest game plan we've had all year," added linebacker Garland Boyette, "There was little blitzing, just basic design."

Bob Barber sacked Bob Davis for a safety, and the Steamer controlled the ball all afternoon with Jim Nance running for 104 yards. Daryl Johnson intercepted a pass in the end zone and Coach Marshall Taylor greeted him in the locker room by exclaiming, "My big play man!" He called Johnson's pick "the biggest play of the game!"

"When a guy looks open," Johnson exalted, "it don't count until he's got the ball in his hands! The first thing I had to worry about was taking away the post—and it was only an 8-yard play—and then I hauled it to the corner."

But the crowd of 12,017 was only a small improvement over the previous week's figure. The team was averaging about half the fans they had in 1974.

Riding a two game winning streak, Shreveport travelled to Portland to play the winless Thunder, and were ambushed 33-24.

"We happened to walk into a situation I was concerned about walking into," noted Marshall Taylor, doing his best Yogi Berra impression.

"We moved the ball the whole night," said Edd Hargett, "but didn't score touchdowns. We didn't play like we should have."

Richmond Flowers spoke for quite a few of his teammates when he said, "I know we're better than that team."

Not only that, a sparse crowd of 6,574 fans at Civic Stadium guaranteed the club would lose money on the trip.

Paul Gipson returned the opening kickoff 73 yards for a touchdown and the Steamer seemed to be off and running. Even when Portland managed to tie the score, Dave Strock booted two field goals to put Shreveport up again, 13-7. "When you've got a team like that down, you've got to kick 'em," said Garland Boyette.

But the Steamer let the Thunder get back off the canvas. With that 13-7 lead, Shreveport had a first and goal at the Portland nine. But three plays netted a minus 6 yards. Strock then was wide left with a 33-yard field goal attempt. Portland came right back and scored to take the lead and the momentum. "It was right there that they got control of the game," said Taylor.

A week later, Shreveport was in Birmingham to take on the Vulcans. "We feel this is a big game for us," said Taylor, "We have lost two games on the road and we have a score to settle."

But the Steamer committed six turnovers and was never really in the game, as Birmingham smashed Shreveport, 21-8. "We just made too many mistakes to beat a football team like Birmingham, particularly on the road," Taylor told reporters after the game.

Speaking of playing on the road, the Steamer had yet to win there, dropping all three away from home contests. "I can't put my finger on it," said Virgil Robinson, "we're just not able to win on the road. It's a mental thing, but I can't explain what or why."

During the week, unrest settled in as some of the players were asked to renegotiate their salaries so the team could save money. "If you tell a guy you're cutting him even $10 a week, it's a downer," offered wide receiver Johnny Odom.

The paltry attendance figures had the money supply drying up. The team's tenuous situation was no more evident than in an interview in the *Shreveport Beacon Journal* with ex-Steamer defensive back Steve Hatch.

Hatch, who was back in his hometown of Akron teaching school, told staff writer Ray Yannucci that he refused to play for nothing, so the team released him. "They not only wanted me to take a pay cut," Hatch said, "They wanted me to play a couple games for nothing. I wouldn't do it, so they released me."

"I had a contract that called for $500 a game, plus a percentage of the gate," Hatch told Yannucci, "With a 20-game schedule, I was guaranteed $10,000. With good attendance I could make about $16–$17,000 a season.

"They wanted me to play for a flat $250 a game," Hatch went on. "At one time they wanted everybody to play for only a percentage of the gate."

Hatch said that the Steamer never missed a payday, and that the team operated on a first-class basis. "The equipment, meals and lodging were all first-class. The only thing that wasn't was the travel. And, the only difference there was that instead of flying charter, we flew commercial."

When asked what he thought of the caliber of play in the Wiffle, Hatch responded, "The league has a lot of pro caliber players but not a lot of big names. If the league makes it, it will be a few years before it can compete with the NFL. I've played minor league football in Youngstown, so I've covered all three leagues. The WFL is not quite up to the NFL, but way ahead of any minor league that's played. About the only time it felt like playing minor league ball was when we played before only 7,000 in Portland."

When asked how he felt the team was accepted in Shreveport, Hatch said, "In my opinion, we were accepted very well. The kids would look at us just like we were an NFL team." Yannucci then asked why the team didn't draw more fans. "For one thing," Hatch said, "ticket prices are too high. They are $5 to $7.50 for end zone seats. Another thing is that Shreveport is not as big as Akron. Akron could support a WFL team better."

"The only way it can is to get a TV contract," Hatch replied when asked if he thought the Wiffle would survive, "If not, it will fold or be minor league football."

Hatch played six games for the Steamer. He started two of those—the only two of the six that Shreveport won.

Back home on a rainy day in Shreveport, the Steamer was haunted by a problem that had plagued them all season—sloppy play. The team turned the ball over five times and lost to Jacksonville, 22-15. The crowd was a little better—13,638—but included four non-paying high school bands and was still disappointing and still small enough that the team lost money. Garland Boyette thought the team did well considering the worsening financial state of the franchise.

"It's amazing how the guys played under the circumstances," said the veteran linebacker, "They went out and did a helluva job."

After six weeks and a 2-and-4 record, Shreveport had begun to run out of steam (pun intended). Team officials were worried about the poor attendance figures, which hovered around the 14,000-a game mark, as opposed to the 20 to 25,000 the team needed to stay afloat (pun intended again!).

Reports surfaced that the team was losing $65,000 a week and the front office seemed helpless to stop it. Estimates came out saying that the team had lost almost $300,000 so far in '75. General Manager Al Lange brought up the idea of reducing ticket rates to get fans to come out to the games. He also had been forced to approach some of the players about renegotiating their contracts and even reducing salaries to keep the team going.

Soon Lange himself was out of a job, let go in a cost-cutting move, as the Steamer re-shuffled its front office, eliminating some positions and combining some others. The team's executive committee said in a prepared statement that Lange was fired because "it is the unanimous opinion of the committee that the results of the business operations to date are not up to reasonable expectations."

Lange, who said he learned of the committee's decision on the 19th while he laid in a hospital bed after minor surgery, stated, "My reaction is one of shock, disbelief, and great hurt. Since I gave every possible

effort—physical, mental and otherwise—to promote the success of the Steamer, I do not feel the action was fair or appropriate."

It may not have been fair or appropriate—what is in life sometimes?—but when you're hurting for money, you gotta cut corners somewhere. And having one guy do two jobs—head coach Marshall Taylor was named as Lange's successor—is certainly cheaper than having two people do them.

But they could have at least waited to tell the poor guy after he got out of the hospital.

"We had some players work on a percentage basis tonight because we asked them to," explained Taylor, "They may not feel the same way about it next week."

"The problem is money," said Taylor, "We are almost out of steam, having only enough funds for about two more weeks. I have been ordered to cut $18,000 to $20,000 per week from the payroll. Essentially that means the guys may have to play for $250 per week instead of their contractual $500."

Defensive tackle Ron Rydalch, one of the team's best players, balked at the idea of a pay cut and left the team. "He has not been cut from the squad," said Taylor, "We told him what we could do and that's it. We'll probably lose one or two more players because they won't want to renegotiate." Rydalch joined former WFL coach Jack Pardee with the NFL Bears and played six solid years in Chicago.

"We've got a little money in reserve," said Taylor, "but if we keep spending it at the rate we're going, it could only last another two weeks. We've got to get our house in order.

"We have never failed to make a payroll, and we won't," Taylor continued, "We've renegotiated 16 of the 21 fixed contracts, getting them to accept a percentage. We're getting close to where we can live with gates of 13,000 people."

Taylor added that the club would try and renegotiate some of their no-cut contracts, including those of quarterback Edd Hargett, wide receiver Ricky Scales and defensive lineman Robert Barber.

Jim Nance said he would hang in and stay with the team in the hopes that the crowds would improve. "A crowd of 40,000 would solve this whole problem, that and the reassurance this league will be here next year. I feel something can always be worked out. But I am taking a gamble," said the big fullback, "I'm owed a lot of money.

"It's just like last year when the players were being asked to sacrifice," Nance went on. "I understand why they're doing it. They're trying to create stability that will keep the team going through the end of the season and into next year. But it's going to reach a point where some players may not want to sacrifice any more."

The players were asked to participate in Operation Full House, manning ticket booths and canvassing Shreveport residents by telephone, begging them to buy tickets. In an attempt to boost attendance, the franchise also got special permission from the league to offer cut-rate tickets in the end zone, which originally sold for $5 and $7.50, for just $3.

"The only revenue we've got coming in are gate receipts," said Taylor, "We don't have the concessions, no television, nothing. So we've had to ask the players to agree on terms of a contract that will take the pressure off which has been caused by the crowds we've been drawing. And then we'll just hope the crowds get better."

The team travelled to Memphis and continued their losing ways on the road, falling for the fourth time in as many away games, 34-23. When his team fell behind 26-0, Coach Taylor replaced Hargett with backup D.C. Nobles who led the Steamer to 23 points in the last quarter.

"D.C. played a helluva game," said wide receiver Johnny Odom, "He really picked things up."

Nobles hit on 13 of 28 passes for three touchdowns and two successful action point conversions, pretty good for a guy who was all set to leave the team just two weeks before.

"I packed my suitcase, called my family, and told them I would be home," said Nobles, who had been frustrated by his lack of playing time and the team's lack of success, "Anyway, I figured I would get cut. Leon Jenkins is my roommate and he told me not to, that my chance would come. I've got so many friends here, so I stayed."

As the game progressed and the deficit got larger, the Steamer seemed to be frustrated about the score of the game and their financial worries. The second half saw a couple of fights break out, usually started by the frustrated Steamer. A Memphis player said that Shreveport "seemed to be taking their hostilities out after the plays instead of during them." Rookie cornerback Melvin Daniels got into an altercation with Memphis wide receiver Ed Marshall, and both players were ejected and faced automatic $250 fines from the league office—no small amount since for a lot of players that was a week's salary.

"It's been hard for us to get together," said Marshall Taylor, "We have four different attitudes because of four different contracts. It makes mental attitudes a problem. We're at the point where we have to regroup as a team and forget about who's making how much

money. We should be working toward the betterment of the operation."

"We will turn this football team around," Taylor added, his tone of voice softening and his attitude becoming a bit more positive. "We need to pick up three or four players of the 182 that will be cut by the NFL teams this week. We need depth in two or three spots."

Taylor said the team was "expecting 25,000 for the Southern California game," and that the Steamer needed to play "inspired football." He got half his wish. With Hargett back under center the Steamer hosted the Sun before 18,777 fans in State Fair Stadium. Although he wasn't certain he'd be starting until the player introductions—"I didn't know until they announced my name on the PA," said Hargett—he threw for a team record 369 yards and led Shreveport to an inspired 38-29 win, snapping the team's four-game losing streak. Rick Eber caught 7 passes for 170 yards.

"Edd was unbelievable," said Jim Nance, "All you can say is that he was putting the ball where the guys could get it."

"I started Hargett because in my mind I thought he could throw in a controlled-type offense, and that's Edd's strong suit," said Marshall Taylor, "I didn't have my mind made up until today and as far as I'm concerned, they're both still Number One. D.C. was the first guy I talked to when we came in the dressing room. I told him his time would come."

A week later, Daryl Johnson did it again, intercepting a pass intended for Tim Delaney in the end zone with less than 40 seconds left to seal a 32-25 win over The Hawaiians. The win pleased the largest crowd of the season, 21,349, which also set a team record. Jim Nance plowed for 113 yards on the ground, and Hargett continued his pinpoint accuracy, completing 14 of 20 passes for 241 yards and two touchdowns, one of them an under-handed toss to Jim Nance.

"The play was supposed to go to Rick (Eber)," said Hargett, "and I tried to throw to the right side, but they bumped me around and I took off the other way. I had the ball down and almost didn't get rid of it."

A goal line stand by the Steamer, where they held The Hawaiians on four downs inside the seven, also helped.

The win over The Hawaiians gave Shreveport a 4-and-5 record, only one game behind second place Southern California.

Another good crowd of 20,470 was on hand at State Fair Stadium on October 5th to see the Steamer host Charlotte. They watched Shreveport make just about every mistake a football team can make. If the ground had opened up and swallowed his team, Taylor probably wouldn't have blinked. When it was over, the Hornets dismantled the Steamer, 39-14.

Shreveport gave up 23 points in the last quarter. D. C. Nobles had a pick-seven and kicker Dave Strock had a field goal blocked, and then a punt blocked and returned for a touchdown. "I really took a beating today. I would say the kicking game needs some work," said Strock.

"The special teams were the difference in the game," said linebacker Bob Creech. "We didn't protect the kicker."

"We took the opening kickoff and we were doing the things we do well," said a dejected Hargett, "Then we got away from it and tried to do too much junk. We had some bad plays called. Some were mine, some were sent in. We didn't make the plays when we needed it."

Shreveport travelled to Anaheim for the first weekend of the Fall Season. Everyone was 0-and-0 again. At the end of the game, the Steamer was 0-and-1 for the Fall Season.

Once again, Shreveport was sabotaged by their season-long problem of holding onto the football. "We just made a lot of mental mistakes," said linebacker Durfey Thompson, and those mental mistakes, as well as some physical ones, did the Steamer in once again, and they fell to the Sun, 39-30.

Starting center Sam Holden was tossed from the game, and rookie tight end Rory Best, at only 221 pounds, had to fill in. This led to some mishandled snaps that the Sun capitalized on and hurt the rushing game. "After Sam went out, we had trouble running the ball," said Hargett.

"A guy hit me after the play," said Holden, "He tried to slap my face, and I hit him with my forearm. I could see a 15-yard penalty but not kicking me out of the game."

Jimmy Edwards, recently acquired from Birmingham, rushed for two touchdowns, but to no avail.

"When the offense scores 30 points you're supposed to win," said Bob Creech, "We just didn't rise up when we should have."

The game drew just 10,505 fans to The Big A in Anaheim, which made for another small payoff for the Steamer. Attendance had become a problem league-wide. Philadelphia and Portland were pitiful. Jacksonville hadn't been able to draw 17,000 fans to any of their games. The Steamer was improving at the gate but was still hurting financially. Because of the cash flow problems, nearly every team had been forced to cut payroll.

"You played for nothing," said offensive tackle Sam Holden, "The only thing that kept you going was pride."

A day after the weekend's games, WFL officials met in New York to discuss what to do to get through the rest of the season. It was termed by many a "critical" meeting. After discussions that touched on several solutions, the owners decided to continue playing.

Back home on the 19th, the Steamer ripped San Antonio 41-31. Due to the rampant talk of the WFL going under, the game drew a season low 8,581 fans.

The defense intercepted quarterback Jerry Tagge, filling in for an injured Johnnie Walton, five times. The Steamer also sacked Tagge twice and held the Wings to 59 yards on the ground. For Shreveport, Edwards rushed for 82 yards and Nance added 54.

Steamer owner John Atkins told reporters after the game that the league's owners would be meeting on Wednesday the 22nd to again discuss the status of the league. Steamer coaches and players discussed the state of the league and what was in store for them and the Wiffle.

"The players are fully aware that the league is going on a day-to-day basis right now," said head coach Marshall Taylor, "I have never been negative toward the league and I don't think this is the last game Shreveport will play. I think the league will find ways to make it go."

"I certainly hope this is not the last game," Taylor continued, "I feel like our football team has a chance to win in the league. It's said that we're (the league) so close to being over the hump and then get in a situation like we had last year."

"I went out there thinking this was the last game," Daryl Johnson explained, "I couldn't tell you if it was, but if it was, I wanted to leave the city with something to remember."

"Right now, I don't know what to think," offered Jim Nance, "I'm ready for anything, but I hope this isn't the last game. It's got to be a downer when you don't know what's going on."

"It looks dark at this point," said Johnny Odom, "I thought all along our hope for next year was television, but no one knows if we'll have TV next year. If this league doesn't make it, it will be a long time before another league tries it and that's sad because the NFL has such a monopoly."

"I talked to (San Antonio defensive tackle) Joe Critchlow," said center Clyde Williams, "and he says they're in good shape down there. I don't think this is the last game. I hope not."

"If we weathered last year . . ." offered linebacker Garland Boyette, "I don't know what the league governors will do, but I don't think they'll let it linger on without getting something in return. I think they'll cut the season short if they can't meet their obligations, but I don't think it's the end of the WFL. You can cut the season short and still come back next year."

"As far as I know, we'll go until December 13th," said center Sam Holden.

On Tuesday, for the second time in a little over a week, Atkins flew to New York where the league owners met to discuss their views on the Wiffle. Atkins had to report that the Steamer had lost $450,000. With a mediocre 5-and-7 record, the prospect of even more financial losses, a questionable ticket and fan base, no television contract, and with the franchise almost out of money, Atkins voted to fold the whole thing. Five other owners voted with him. Only four elected to keep playing.

The "Boats" sank for good with the rest of the WFL on October 22nd, 1975. The team, just like the league, had too many holes to try to plug up at the same time.

On December 2nd, 1975, the Steamer, in an effort to help pay off their $51,000 worth of debts, decided to hold a public auction. The team was able to sell 3,000 tickets at $10 each for what they called the "Overtime Affair." Some of the Steamer helmets are sold for up to $100 each. Unbelievably, after swimming for most of their existence in a sea of red ink, the team was able to close its books in the black.

CHAPTER 31

Sun Rise, Sun Set . . . Part II

The Southern California Sun, 1975

"You've got to bite and scratch for every yard. If the NFL is tougher than this, I'd like to see it."

—ANTHONY DAVIS, running back, Southern California Sun

After the disappointing end to the once promising '74 season, the Sun was hit by another blindside tackle when team and league MVP Tony Adams was freed from his contract with the team on January 1st, 1975. The Sun had now lost four of their top offensive players from their 1974 team. Although the team announced that they hoped to re-sign all of the free agents, there was little chance any of them would return, and they didn't.

Adams made sure of that by filing a $10.2-million lawsuit against the Sun in June, claiming breach of contract, conspiracy to commit fraud and fraud. He received cash and his release in an out-of-court settlement.

The outlook for the franchise looked bleak. "We were expecting the team to fold," linebacker Eric Patton said. "It was a frustrating off-season. The players were disillusioned after not being paid, and we just didn't know what was going to happen next."

What happened next was that Sam Battistone, owner of the Sambo's restaurant chain, the NBA's New Orleans Jazz, and an investor in The Hawaiians franchise in 1974, became the Sun's new owner in January of 1975. He kept Larry Hatfield as president and immediately tried to stabilize the franchise.

The team owed more than $250,000 in back salaries, so Battistone issued payments of $750 to each employee in January and promised a second installment in March.

"We felt like we had a renewed life," Patton said. "Everything seemed very polished. It felt good after all the things that went on the year before."

Battistone also offered a little compensation to the coaching staff, which was an unusual offer, to say the least. He might not have been able to save what was left of his employees from the financial mess they were in from the previous year, but he would at least be able to keep them from starving—literally.

"Battistone allowed the coaches to go get food from a market he owned and put it against what the team owed us," assistant coach Tom Baldwin said. "The only problem was it was in Santa Barbara. My wife and I would drive up there and load up the car with $700 or $800 worth of food. They were about to repossess my house, but we could eat."

With the help of Dave Williams, the team's player representative, Battistone began to rebuild the team. Williams had been able to hold a vast majority of the players together during the off-season.

All that Jazz . . .

After the demise of the WFL, Sam Battistone brought Larry Hatfield along as an investor in the NBA's New Orleans Jazz. In 1979, Battistone and Hatfield were the prime movers behind the franchise's move to Salt Lake City, Utah.

Tom Fears returned as head coach to provide some much needed continuity, and all but one of his assistants from '74 signed up for another season.

A tough, fiercely straightforward man, Fears proclaimed that the Sun was better than the expansion team he coached in its first three years in New Orleans. Since those Saints finished with a record of 13-34-2 under Fears, it seemed like faint praise indeed.

With Adams gone, Daryle Lamonica, who had signed a "future contract" in '74, appeared ready to take over as the starter. To back him up, Southern California picked up rookie Pat Haden from USC and journeyman Mike Ernst.

"I was going to England as a Rhodes Scholar at the end of the summer," Haden said. "This gave me a chance to play in professional games. If I went with the Rams, I might have played a quarter in a preseason game or two. The Sun also offered more money."

Rhodes Scholar or not, Haden found out he wasn't immune to the shenanigans of defensive tackle Dave "Rockin'" Roller.

"Dave once told me to bus his (lunch) tray," said Haden, "It was one of those ways you treat rookies. Well, I said no, and he ended up taking a couple of shots at me during practice. He didn't like quarterbacks no matter whose team they were on, even his."

Wide receiver and player rep Dave Williams, one of the Wiffle's top receivers in '74, returned for '75. Others who came back for a second go-round with the Sun were running back Keith Denson, defensive linemen Roller, Tim Guy and Charles DeJurnett, tight end Chuck Bradley, linebackers James Baker and Cleveland Vann, cornerback Gene Howard, and defensive back Eric Johnson.

Unfortunately, not all news was good news personnel-wise in the spring of '75 for the Sun.

Defensive tackle Curley Culp, and offensive guard Bob Newton, both of whom had signed future contracts with the Sun in 1974, announced that they would not be joining the team after all. Culp said he had been released from his WFL contract, while Newton told Bears' management that he now wanted to stay in Chicago.

Besides Haden, other rookies who joined the team were center Art Kuehn, wide receiver J. K. McKay, running back Gary Dixon, punter Alvin White, and, the biggest catch of all, All-American running back Anthony Davis.

The Sun wanted Davis badly. He had gone to school at USC and despite the opinion of many experts that the 5'9" 182 pounder was too small for pro ball, the front office knew having Anthony in magenta-and-orange would mean more fannies in the seats.

"I was drafted by the Jets, and I felt I was slighted by the NFL," recalled Davis, "When I tell you this, I was a very flamboyant, in-your-face type of player. I think the NFL wanted me in New York because of that. I was upset about the way I was drafted; I wanted to play for the Rams."

The courtship of Davis, unfortunately, did mean the return of the franchise's old friend Mike Trope. Not too many people had forgotten Trope's interactions with the team concerning the trio of high-profile Sun 1974 rookies—Booker Brown, Kermit Johnson and James McAlister. Trope had convinced Brown and Johnson to boycott the Sun's '74 playoff game, then had declared all three free agents and coaxed them to depart for the NFL after the Sun failed to meet their final payroll in 1974.

But Trope was willing to let bygones be bygones, and apparently so was the team. The New York Jets selected Davis in the 2nd round of the NFL Draft in January. But Davis didn't feel the Jets made a concerted effort to sign him.

"Weeb Ewbank came out," Davis remembered, "Charlie Winner, who was the coach then, came out and questioned whether or not I could even start with the Jets. I said in the paper, 'If I can't start with a team that is 2-and-12, I don't deserve to be in pro football.' New York went crazy."

The Jets offered a three-year deal worth $150,000 in base salary and signing bonus. But in the end, Trope inked Davis to a five-year contract with the Sun reportedly worth $1.7 million plus a silver Rolls Royce.

"The Sun, that's the kind of organization the NFL needed, they built an organization that wanted to win," recalled Davis, "We had great management with the Southern California Sun."

The news of Davis' signing and the figures of his contract did not sit too well with creditors who were still awaiting payment on bills from 1974. When news of the pact hit the newspapers, creditors began to arrive in General Manager Larry Hatfield's office to inquire why their bills could not be paid if there was that sort of money to hand out.

"It's hard to explain that this is a different deal from last year," Hatfield tried hard to explain. "To be successful and eventually pay off everybody, we need quality players like Davis, whose salary is highly exaggerated, but most of our creditors understand the situation. I wondered if we would be able to get credit at all this year, and it turns out a lot of people are willing to trust us again."

The fans, though, thanks to the escapades of 1974, had little trust and were somewhat dubious of the whole venture. It was revealed that the Sun had sold only around 6,000 season tickets for the 1975 season, a substantial drop from the reported 20,000 season tickets the team moved in 1974.

Problems also arose concerning the team's personnel. Lamonica and Haden both suffered injuries

during training camp, and both would open the season on the injured list. That meant Mike Ernst, who had played only one game with Denver in '72 and one with the Bengals in '73, would open the season as the starting signal caller.

"If it wasn't for the WFL," said Ernst, "I'd be picking corn in Indiana."

The quarterback position had been expected to be almost an embarrassment of riches for the Sun. But it was the team that turned out to be embarrassed when they believed they could trade '74 backup Gary Valbuena to San Antonio for running back Paul Miles. Many times during the season the Sun probably wished they had Valbuena back as the quarterback situation turned out to be unsettled all year.

Haden saw most of the snaps, but had to leave the team in September by previous agreement to pursue his Rhodes scholarship at Oxford. Haden's postgraduate plans were the reason that the Rams waited until the seventh round to draft him, and didn't really energetically pursue getting his signature on a contract. It's also why Fears considered him little more than an extra arm on the practice field in training camp. Who wanted to have to rely on a quarterback who could play only half a season, Fears reasoned.

What was supposed to happen, of course, and very little happened that was supposed to in the Wiffle, was for Lamonica, who played on 10 division championship teams at Buffalo and Oakland, to move right in as the starting quarterback. Lamonica had signed one of the infamous "future contracts" with the Sun in 1974 and watched from the safety of Oakland as the league seemed ready to disappear in an avalanche of debts, including quite a few unpaid salaries. When the "old" WFL went bankrupt and the "new" WFL was organized, Lamonica accepted a salary for '75 that was roughly half of what he had been promised. But Lamonica thought he would just eat up the WFL.

Instead, he was hit so hard in a July exhibition game that he suffered a bilateral hernia.

That left the Sun quarterbacking to Haden and Ernst. Haden astonished the Sun coaches by understanding what they were talking about almost at once, even when the coaches themselves weren't sure what they meant.

"In the first three days of camp we gave him 70 plays and he memorized them immediately," said Babe Dimancheff, the team's offensive coordinator. "I gave all our quarterbacks an exam where they had to chart not only plays but defenses, too. Out of 60 questions, Haden missed one."

"I've been very lucky," Haden says. "I'm playing at home on a good team with some old friends and things have fallen into place. But my priority is my education. After Oxford, I'll sit down and think what I want to do with my life. If football is still fun, I'll keep it up."

The Sun hosted San Antonio in their preseason opener. The game drew 14,046 people to the Big A in Anaheim, and they saw the Sun move out to a 22-8 lead and then hold off the Wings to take it, 36-31. Southern California held San Antonio to 29 yards on the ground, while rookies Anthony Davis—62 yards—and Gary Dixon—60—paced a strong rushing attack for the Sun. The expansion Wings hung tough, a lot tougher than many expected, as they burned the Sun for 343 yards in the air, and sacked Lamonica and Haden five times. After San Antonio went ahead, 31-29 with around 11 and a half minutes left, the Sun marched 96 yards to score the winning touchdown on a Haden run.

It had been a satisfying debut for Davis.

"I was ready to go," Davis remembered, "I had some veteran guys to learn from. Lamonica, Roller, Ernst, and DeJurnett, these were all talented guys, and I learned a lot from them."

Southern California then hosted Memphis on Monday the 14th. A crowd of 22,705 was on hand to see the "Big Three" of Memphis. Uncertainties surrounding the WFL saw the team sell 14,000 of those tickets at the box office in the 90 minutes before kickoff. The fans were definitely taking a "wait-and-see" attitude toward the Sun and the Wiffle.

"People were waiting to see if Csonka, Kiick and Warfield would really come to town with Memphis," said Sun Vice President Don Andersen.

The "Big Three" did indeed come to town, but the Sun defense kept them pretty much bottled up. "After we tackled them," said defensive tackle Dave Roller, "we'd say 'Welcome to the WFL.'" It was Anthony Davis who put on a show for the fans, however. A.D. scored four touchdowns and added two action points as the Sun clobbered the Grizzlies, 47-16.

"I felt good out there," said Davis, "It was the most points I've scored in a game since the six touchdowns against Notre Dame my sophomore year."

"He runs a lot harder than I thought he would," said Memphis linebacker Bob Lally.

After the game, Larry Csonka went up the Davis and shook his hand. "Man, I don't know what they're (the NFL) thinkin,'" he told Davis, "but you've got a great career ahead of you."

"That meant a lot coming from him," recalled Davis.

The Sun forced six turnovers, including five picks, to keep the ball away from the "Big Three" for most of the game. The Grizzlies managed only 55 yards on the ground.

"Our defensive line set the tempo, stopping their two big backs," said Fears.

The only negative aspect of the game was Lamonica getting hit hard and suffering the bilateral hernia that kept him out of action for awhile.

Southern California then traveled to Philadelphia for their final exhibition game, and the Sun won their third preseason game in a row by whipping the Bell, 23-8 before only 2,614 fans.

"There was literally nobody in the stands before the game, except maybe 60 ushers," said wide receiver J.K. McKay, "The starting lineups were introduced and Terry Lindsey was first out. Then we got word that people were on their way to the game. We were sent back into the locker room with Terry still standing out on the field. They said later there were over 2,000 in the stands, but it was closer to 150."

Haden completed 8 of 14 passes for 118 yards, and Davis scored three touchdowns. The Sun finished the preseason 3-and-0, and had scored more points—106—than any team in the league.

The Sun opened the 1975 season on August 3rd, defeating the Portland Thunder 21-15 on the arm of third-string quarterback Mike Ernst. The NFL castoff threw for two touchdowns and also ran 39 yards to set up another score.

"I was getting a lot of pressure early from Dave Costa," said Ernst, "but we got that straightened out. All in all, we did a good job although it wasn't very pretty." Anthony Davis led all rushers with 102 yards on the ground in 23 carries, and also completed a 16-yard option pass to Chuck Bradley to set up a nine-yard scoring run by Greg Herd.

The announced crowd of 14,362, however, was one of the smallest in the history of the franchise, and didn't bode well for the team.

The 1975 team did manage to produce an incident that became famous in Los Angeles-area broadcast history. On a radio broadcast on KABC, Ed "Superfan" Beiler was promoting an upcoming road game between the Sun and the San Antonio Wings. At the end of his comments, Beiler said, "And of course, the river, what's the name of the river that goes through . . . the San Antonio River goes right through the heart of downtown Los Angeles." The blooper would be played repeatedly on Jim Healy's radio programs, first on KLAC, then on KMPC.

Six days after winning their opener, Southern California was stunned by San Antonio, 54-22. The Sun turned the ball over 10 times and the Wings held Davis to 45 yards rushing. "There was a San Antonio player everywhere I went," said Davis. Pat Haden completed 24 of 40 passes for 313 yards and three touchdowns, but was also intercepted three times.

After the loss in San Antonio, the Sun won three games in a row, two of them on the road. Southern California scored 23 points in the fourth quarter as Haden threw two touchdown passes and connected on two action point passes, and the Sun beat The Hawaiians, 37-19 in Honolulu.

Haden finished the game with 12 completions in 19 attempts for 177 yards. Anthony Davis rushed 23 times for 118 yards and two touchdowns and returned 3 kickoffs for another 70 yards. The defense, meanwhile, registered three sacks and intercepted three passes.

Southern California then defeated Birmingham 35-25 on August 23rd, handing that franchise their first ever loss in Legion Field. The Vulcans rallied at the end of the first half to erase a 21-11 deficit and take a 25-21 halftime lead. But the Sun forced a total of five turnovers and Haden had another solid game, hitting on 10 of 16 passes for 204 yards and a couple scores.

"It feels good to come in here and win," said Fears, "Birmingham's a very good team. They made a great comeback at halftime. Boy that scared me."

The first two times Davis touched the ball in a wild 58-39 win over the Philadelphia Bell in Anaheim, he threw a left-handed 51-yard touchdown pass and ran 84 yards for another six points on a kickoff return.

He finished the night with 115 yards rushing, 101 more on kickoff returns and even gained another 22 yards catching passes.

"I'm tired, man," Davis said, sitting in his locker-room cubicle after the game. "You've got to bite and scratch for every yard. If the NFL is tougher than this, I'd like to see it."

Fears described Davis as the quickest back he had ever seen, not as fast overall as Lenny Moore or Gale Sayers perhaps, but quicker for the first few yards, which was often when it mattered most.

Haden, the league's leading passer, threw for three Sun touchdowns before he retired in the third quarter.

"Frankly, I didn't think we would use Haden much this year," Fears said. "Now I think he's the best rookie quarterback I've seen since Joe Namath."

After the game, Haden and Fears had nothing but praise for Dave Williams, who caught a league-record four touchdown passes in the game.

"He's a very intelligent man," said Haden, "He comes back and tells me things like what's open and what's covered."

"Dave can play for any team in any league," added Fears, "He is excellent at coming back for the ball when it is underthrown."

Having recovered from his hernia operation, Lamonica was to have played part of the game against the Bell, but he had broken some blood vessels under his right arm and was held out again. It didn't look as if the Sun really needed him, as Haden was having a fine rookie campaign.

But just when things were looking up for the Sun, the team lost three in a row and four of their next five.

The Sun was originally supposed to play in Chicago next, but on September 2nd the WFL expelled the Winds' franchise when two of its owners deserted the already sinking ship. Since San Antonio was scheduled to have a bye week, the Sun went to the River City for the second time. And for the second time, the Sun lost to the surprising Wings, 30-8.

Neither Haden nor Lamonica was able to spark the offense to life. Southern California lost two fumbles and was hit with 13 penalties, seven of which led to first downs for the Wings. Dave Roller drew the ire of San Antonio head coach Perry Moss for throwing an elbow at the head of Wing quarterback Johnnie Walton. "That was definitely wide-open roughness and one of these days he's gonna hurt somebody badly," said Moss. The loss dropped the Sun (4-and-2) to second place behind San Antonio (5-and-2) in the West.

Seven days later, the Sun lost their first game at The Big A in Anaheim since the '74 playoffs. Southern California led Charlotte 22-15, early in the last quarter, but could not hold the lead as the Hornets scored two touchdowns to waste a 141-yard rushing performance by Davis. Again, neither Haden nor Lamonica, who between them threw four picks, could sustain a good offense. The team also set a new all-time low in attendance when only 11,123 folks bothered to show up.

The defense then let the team down as Shreveport's Edd Hargett threw for 369 yards and three touchdowns in a 38-29 win in Louisiana. Another solid performance by Davis—104 yards rushing, three touchdowns—was wasted.

"We looked bad again—terrible," said Fears, "Shreveport's basically a running team, but on the pass they killed us. We make running teams into passing teams. We don't pick off any passes, even if they're floating in the air. Hargett's a good passer. I know, because I had him at New Orleans. He's good when he has the time and he had the time."

With the Sun trailing late in the game, Haden fumbled the snap on a second-and-goal. There was a fight for the ball and possession was awarded to Steamer defensive end Robert Barber. That killed the Sun drive and ticked off Haden to no end.

"What's fair is fair and I recovered that ball," Haden snapped afterward, "There's no question about it. I think I have enough integrity that I wouldn't lie."

"He's the nicest kid I know and I don't think he'd lie about it," said Fears.

Lamonica skipped the game in Shreveport and then officially confirmed his retirement on September 24th, walking away from a reported $500,000 contract.

Of course, this being the WFL, something as mundane as a retirement announcement couldn't go off without some kind of hitch.

After he skipped the Shreveport game, Lamonica was listed as AWOL by the Sun. "I don't know what all this is about my being AWOL from the Southern California Sun," said Lamonica, "I told Larry Hatfield last Wednesday that I was finished with football. Hatfield asked if the club could announce the retirement and I said yes. And then I find out they're telling everyone that I'm absent without leave."

Lamonica never quite shook off his pre-season hernia injury, and was also bothered by an arthritic knee, and had appeared sparingly in only two games.

"I love football," Lamonica said, "but I've always said I'd quit when the time came. The time has come." His 9 of 19 for 90 yards and 1 touchdown passing statistics for an injury-plagued season was a bitter disappointment to both Lamonica and the team.

"I told Ernie Wheelwright that Lamonica gave up $75,000 a year for 17 years when he left," assistant coach Tom Baldwin said. "Ernie said he would kiss a mongoose for that kind of money."

Haden also left the team that week, heading to Oxford to continue his education. Southern California had not only lost three games in a row but two quarterbacks as well. Haden was leading the league in passing and was engineering the WFL's Number One offense, but now he was on his way to England. The Sun's quarterback surplus had suddenly become a deficit, with only the corn farmer from Indiana, Mike Ernst, left on the roster. To help out, the Sun picked up Wayne Estabrook—who had backed up Tony Adams in 1974—from The Hawaiians.

Despite the turnover in personnel, the Sun got a 7-yard touchdown run by Davis in the 4th quarter to lift the team over Charlotte, 24-17 and snap the three game losing streak. Kicker Benny Ricardo, signed on the 17th after Ron Ayala, Ingmar Kauffeldt and

Ed Strickland had all been found wanting, booted three field goals, and Davis had 101 yards rushing and 109 yards receiving.

"I didn't feel any particular pressure," said Ernst afterward, "I didn't feel I had to do better than Pat Haden. We just had to move the ball on the ground and in the air."

Although the Sun was not having any financial difficulties, other teams in the league were. The players on four teams were asked to either re-negotiate contracts or take pay cuts. Some teams were having attendance problems. The outlook for the Wiffle did not look good.

The outlook for the Sun did not look promising either. The team lost its fourth game in five weeks and saw its record drop to a disheartening 5-and-5 with a 37-33 loss to Memphis.

Southern California had a 26-15 lead early in the third quarter, but Davis left the game with an ankle bruise. His absence stalled the Sun offense, and Memphis scored two quick touchdowns to retake the lead.

"I thought I could have played, I was just dying there on the sidelines, but they didn't want to risk anything," said Davis, who ran 10 times for 59 yards before being hurt.

"It was no use playing a guy who can't operate," said Fears, who then switched gears and criticized the officials. "It seemed that every time we made a gain, a flag went up," the coach grumbled, "After a play, I'd look for a flag before looking to see where the ball was." The Sun was hit with 12 penalties for 122 yards in losses.

Southern California trailed San Antonio by a game-and-a-half in the standings and had not won the West Division's Summer Season championship like many people had predicted they would. They had also lost their top two quarterbacks, and their offense relied too much on the shoulders of Anthony Davis. The defense had given up more points than any in the league, and the team had been outscored 307-to-289 in ten games.

The team rallied, however, and won two in a row over Shreveport and The Hawaiians.

Back at home for the first time in over a month, Southern California forced five turnovers and got another solid performance by Davis—139 yards rushing, a team best 5 receptions, and two touchdowns and two action points—to club the Steamer, 39-30.

Four of the Sun possessions started in Shreveport territory. Marv "Jet-A-Way" Pettaway, who the Sun had picked up after Philadelphia released him, returned a kickoff to the Steamer 40, and eight plays later, Bob Ferrell scored from the two.

The Steamer fumbled and Tim Guy recovered for the Sun at the Shreveport 28. Mike Ernst connected with Davis for 21 yards before A.D. scored from the seven to make it 16-7, Sun.

A Benny Ricardo field goal made it 19-7, but the Steamer scored to close the gap to 19-15. Shreveport fumbled again and linebacker Gordon Riegel recovered this time. That set up Ricardo's 43-yard field goal to put the score at 22-15, and the Steamer was never able to get within seven points again.

"I'm pleased with the offense," commented Fears. "We can move the ball, but we just can't let the other team score every time, too. It's exciting ball—I guess that's what the fans want to see."

But apparently not the fans in Anaheim. The game set another all-time low in attendance, drawing only 10,505 people to "The Big A."

Two days later, Battistone flew to New York to meet with the other WFL owners to decide whether to continue playing or fold the league. For better or worse, the owners decided to keep playing.

On Sunday the 19th in Honolulu, in what turned out to be the last game in the history of the WFL, Davis ran for 109 yards and scored two touchdowns as the Sun trounced The Hawaiians, 26-7. The defense held The Hawaiians to 167 yards in total offense and forced three turnovers. Although they hadn't won the Summer Season title, they were 2-and-0 for the Fall Season.

But rumblings were being felt and heard that the league was on its collective last leg.

"In Hawaii, we started hearing rumors again about the league (folding)," Fears said, "'I think, by then, the league had already had its last chance."

Sure enough, three days later, the league owners gave up the ghost and decided to fold the league. Sam Battistone was one of four owners who voted to continue playing because the Sun was in fairly good financial standing and seemed to be turning their season around after two wins in a row and three in their last four games. But six other owners voted to throw in the towel, and so on October 22nd, the Wiffle folded up its tattered and patchwork tent.

Although overall the season had been a disappointment in Anaheim, Anthony Davis had been the unparalleled star of the 1975 WFL. In 12 games, he racked up 1,200 yards rushing and scored 18 combined touchdowns, on the ground, through the air and via kick return. If the season had been played out to its entirety, Davis might have joined O.J. Simpson as pro football's only 2,000 yard rushers. He almost certainly

would have been tagged as the league's MVP had the chronic financial problems of the WFL not interceded first.

The Sun offices shut down in late October 1975, and Sun President Larry Hatfield told *The Los Angeles Times* that the club lost an estimated $3 million during the 1974 and 1975 seasons.

In mid-November, Sun season ticket holders said they were still trying to recoup money from the franchise but were getting nowhere. The Sun vacated the team offices and disconnected the telephones just days after the league folded for good.

The team had sold roughly 6,000 season tickets for prices ranging from $60.50 to $93.50, but when the league folded, there were still five home games on the Sun schedule. Attempts by the ticket holders to obtain refunds for $42.50 each had gone in vain since they had been unable to reach Sam Battistone.

Larry Hatfield said he had no indication from Battistone that the season ticket holders would ever be reimbursed.

In December 1975, former Sun players Jack Conners and Eric Patton earned themselves some headlines by picketing outside Sam Battistone's home, in an attempt to collect the remainder of their unpaid salaries. Conners and running back Gary Dixon also filed a $500,000 class action lawsuit on behalf of 26 Sun players seeking to collect unpaid salaries from Battistone and Hatfield.

Conners, who said he had been paid for only four games, told reporters, "Originally we wanted to get paid for the 12 games we played in, but now we want pay for the entire season."

Like the season ticket holders, Conners had been unable to reach Battistone.

In the end very few people owed money by the Sun ever saw any of it.

"I think Anthony Davis was the only guy to get his money," said Pat Haden, "I think he had a personal service contract with the owner. Me? I still have the luggage the team gave me when I went off to school in England."

CHAPTER 32

The Walls Came Down

The End of the WFL

"It was on the operating table for two years. This was merely a form of euthanasia."

—JOHN BOSACCO, owner, Philadelphia Bell

The World Football League officially died on October 22nd, 1975. Even in death, the WFL was haunted by bad luck and poor timing. News of the WFL's death got pushed aside and quickly forgotten. That's because on the same day the WFL announced it was folding, the Cincinnati Reds defeated the Boston Red Sox in Game Seven of one of the greatest World Series in history. That was what made all the headlines on the 23rd. Stories of the WFL's demise, meanwhile, were pushed to sidebars and "Today in Sports" blurbs.

Reaction to the news of the league's demise hit most teams on the practice field, and was disappointing to almost everyone involved with the league.

"We were in the middle of practice," said Memphis defensive tackle John LeHeup, "Coach McVay called us over. We thought it was a normal break but then he told us he had gotten word the league was ending as of this afternoon." LeHeup, like others, could see the writing on the wall after the "crisis" meeting on the 13th. "You don't come from shaky to sound in one meeting," said LeHeup, "We knew the league was still not quite sound yet. But we hoped we could get through the next few weeks and at least last out the year."

"I didn't expect this at all," said Charlotte quarterback Tom Sherman, "Last year when we moved here from New York we were still playing ball, but this year it's nothing. It's gone, it's sad."

"We were practicing and this guy came riding in on a motorbike," said Ed Marshall of Memphis, "He handed a Western Union telegram to John McVay. He reads it, calls a meeting and tells us, 'The WFL has folded.' Guys were thinking 'No more football.' I don't think eight teams could have supported the WFL. We went back to the locker room, showered, and I remember standing there thinking, 'I'm never gonna see this equipment again. Yeah, I'm taking mine with me!' The next day we had a meeting about what was going to transpire. Some guys hung around for awhile, the NFL was still playing, the CFL season was finished; there was no place to go. Guys would go out and try to find a job, which was no problem 'cause we played with Memphis. The better players went on to sign with the NFL. We had to fight the stigma of being labeled as 'second class.'"

"We all went to work out," said Bob Davis of Philadelphia, "Willie Wood was there, but they basically said, 'It's over. Clean out your locker and get your last check.' That night I went out with Ted Kwalick and Ben Hawkins to get something to eat and try to figure things out."

"We didn't want to fold," said Jacksonville's George Mira, "We wanted to keep playin.'"

"Frustration is about it," said Charlotte linebacker Jere Brown, "People tried so hard . . . volunteers, Upton Bell, people in the city, people who had faith we were going to make it. It's like popping a balloon."

On the football practice field at the Los Alamitos Naval Air Station, the Southern California Sun were finishing practice. They were scheduled to play Birmingham the next Sunday. But everyone was uneasy, as there had been rumors about the status of the WFL.

Tom Fears was given the word on the practice field by his equipment manager, Chuck Ziober. "Don't say anything to the players yet," Fears whispered. Then he halted practice, told the players to take two laps, and walked to his office.

"He told us to take two laps," said wide receiver J.K. McKay, "Here the league had folded and I was out running laps."

Fears telephoned the Sun office at Anaheim Stadium to get confirmation on the news. He was told that it was indeed official.

"It's over," he said quietly to the few staff members in the office.

Fears then entered the locker room and signaled for quiet.

"Fellas," he said, "the league has folded."

The players sat quietly. For many of them, a dream of playing pro football was over. While it was their final day in a pro football uniform, there were no tears. Only a few bitter epithets broke the silence.

"We were at Los Alamitos," Anthony Davis said, "We had just had our first offensive workout. It was hot and we came into the locker room. Tom Fears called us into the room; we didn't know what was wrong. He stood there, quiet, walked back and forth a bit, and looked up and said, 'Gentlemen, the league has folded . . . the league has folded.' The WFL had put Anaheim and Orange County on the map. I was sitting there with my jersey and pants on and guys . . . well, you know. We needed a television contract, we couldn't get it done."

"Everything has to be packed up, fellas," Fears told the players as they showered and dressed, "The club will probably have to sell all the equipment to pay off creditors."

"All the equipment had been packed up and taken away. At the time, it made me angry," added McKay.

Fourteen players went to a nearby Los Alamitos bar, and, after playing together for a year and a half and bonding like only football players can, they proceeded to get drunk together, downing 27 pitchers of beer between them.

"It was like a wake," Sun linebacker Eric Patton said. "It was very strange. Everybody finally said goodbye, and we went our separate ways."

The next morning, at the team's Anaheim Stadium offices, pictures were removed from the walls, a secretary passed out publicity pictures to some of the players, and a telephone technician disconnected the phones.

"I want everything packed up and everyone out of here as soon as possible," said Larry Hatfield, "I don't want to have to come to this office anymore. It's too painful."

"I didn't expect it," said Memphis head coach John McVay, "I thought they would let a couple of other teams go down but not fold the whole league. There was some real strength in the league. Some teams, especially this one, had strength comparable to a lot of the teams in the other league."

"It's hard to believe after last week's announcement saying we'd finish the season," said Larry Csonka, "I'm still under contract to John Bassett and we'll have a talk. I have a lot of thinking to do. I wasn't happy about the news."

Willie Wood, head coach of the Bell, spoke with grief in his voice. "I put my reputation on the line when I took this job," Wood said quietly, "I committed myself to building something to try and win some games, and at the same time build something for the next three, four years. I don't think the team I took over was very good, but I tried, I tried to groove the spirit, add some players—we could have been on our way. I can't say I was shocked by what has happened. But I suddenly realized how hard I've been rooting for this underdog. I suddenly realized a whole lot of good people are out of work. I suddenly realized a great idea had gone to dust."

"I thought it was going to be another AFL," said Eric Patton, "It looked like a great opportunity for guys like me, who hadn't played in the National Football League but still had some ability."

"I'm surprised and shocked," offered Jim Kiick, "You go through practice, they blow a whistle and that's it. I enjoyed the whole situation here. I'm not in as bad a shape as some of the other guys, but I'm still as disappointed."

"Rumors were all around," said Shreveport quarterback Bubba Wyche, "Guys were wondering, 'when am I just getting in my car and drivin' home?' We were sitting around and one of the equipment managers came over and said, 'There's some padlocks on all the equipment rooms and they're not ours!' We sat there staring at each other.

"There was no team meeting, no phone calls, only word of mouth. I suspect that if they had a meeting of some sort it wouldn't have gone over very well."

"I remember one day that Shreveport called us and said that they weren't coming to play," said Hugh Wyatt, referring to a scheduled game of October 26th, "It was about the same time Bob Brodhead was in New York City and he called me to tell me the league was done. I was sitting there with a guy from the Oregon Journal and he asked me, 'How do you feel?' And I said, 'Well, it's an in-between day . . . not as good as yesterday, and it will be half as good as tomorrow.' To put the thing in perspective, they were shutting down saw mills all over Oregon and a lot of people were out of work at that time.

"This is the second year in a row this has happened to me," Wyatt continued, "I'm really sorry the good people got hurt, but the WFL deserved to die twice."

"Thank goodness I have something else," said Brodhead, "It's a very traumatic thing. We were told

we could survive three years. All of a sudden to not have it last one year was really a shock.

"I'm an auditor," Brodhead continued, "I'm working for a CPA firm in town until I can find something in sports or whatever I want to get into."

Brodhead went on to say that only one member of the Thunder coaching staff, Ray Braun, had found work, as defensive coordinator at Oregon State. He added that about 15 to 20 of the 38 Thunder players were still in the Portland area, stating, "I would say at least 12 or 13 have been contacted about signing contracts with NFL teams next year."

"I feel sorry for Memphis," said offensive guard Tom Kruyer of the Southmen, "We've got 15,000 to 20,000 fans really behind us and I feel sorry for them. It makes me sad that our team may be broken up. I'll miss so many people."

Philadelphia General Manager Rich Iannarella said news of the decision to fold was like "being run over by a car." He tried to tell the coaching staff about the decision to cease operations but couldn't do it without breaking down.

"I know you'll probably think I'm nuts, but I really think we could have made it if we could have gutted it out another year," Iannarella said in an interview, "But then it's not my money. I can't in good conscience tell somebody to keep throwing money down a hole if it doesn't look like there's an end to that hole."

Although Charlotte's average of 10,088 fans per game was the third worse in the 10-team league, Hornets' General Manager Upton Bell said he voted against disbanding the league.

"Charlotte was not part of that vote," Bell said, "Our coaches, our players and our front office wanted to go on. We felt it was a worthwhile opportunity."

Bell, however, had said that if attendance did not increase by 50 percent, he would have to consider either moving or folding the team. "If there's nobody at the gate, you don't pay your players, you don't pay your bills and it's the same thing all over again," Bell stated, referring to the financial debacle of 1974.

Memphis linebacker Bob Lally also blamed a lot of the problems on the ills that beset the league in 1974. "If we had this year's financial structure last year," Lally explained, "The WFL would be on its way to being a major league operation. But the league had two strikes against it and never had a chance with the national media."

Philadelphia Bell linebacker Tim Rossovich echoed those same sentiments, pinning the blame for the WFL's failure on "negative publicity" in the off-season that he claimed hurt the sale of season tickets. "I think the WFL was hoping to make it through this season and next season they'd get the TV money to stabilize it," said Rossovich, "I felt we played good, entertaining football and that people who were at the games weren't disappointed."

"The press is everything in sports," said Shreveport offensive lineman Bill Ellenbogen. "The WFL folded because the press failed to give it adequate coverage. The press acts as a mouthpiece for the NFL owners and it gave the new league a bad rap."

Ellenbogen had a point. The WFL was and is ridiculed in the press as a goofy league that did a whole lot of things wrong in its 22 months of existence. The NFL and the press jumped on every negative story about the WFL and the newspapers ran them ad nauseum. But was the WFL really any different than the NFL in its earliest days? Not really, if you look at the evidence. The NFL certainly went through an extended period of growing pains. Of course, by 1974, the NFL could sit on its high horse and talk down about the WFL from a position of power, authority and superiority. It had beaten back every try at a rival league and was sitting pretty all alone in the pro football universe. As Gary Davidson had said, the NFL had grown "arrogant." They were full of themselves and they knew it. But it wasn't always that way, and in some cases it still isn't.

With the WFL finished, a lot of players were now looking for work. That meant the NFL. But NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle announced that the cut-off date to sign WFL players for the remainder of the '75 season was October 28th, less than a week after the WFL had announced it was folding. Needless to say, the suddenly out-of-work Wiffle players were not happy about the decision.

Defensive tackle Dave Roller had signed a contract with the Green Bay Packers two hours before Rozelle barred WFL players from joining NFL teams. But the Packers said they would await further word from the NFL offices on whether the court decision would allow them to add Roller to their roster.

Roller, contacted at his home in Anaheim, Calif., where he had been since Rozelle stripped him of his Packers uniform, said he was tired of having to wait for Rozelle's rules. "I've been told to low-key everything and I'm sick of it," said Roller, the only WFL player to sign a NFL contract between the period of the WFL's death and Rozelle's ruling.

"Here a guy states arbitrarily that I can't work at my livelihood," Roller said, "It cost me three weeks of games and practices I could have proven myself. It seems un-American. Why they didn't let me play in Green Bay I'll never know. I never heard from the league office explaining why."

Finally, nine former Hawaiian players—Ken Bowman, Chuck Detwiler, Mike Donohue, John Kelsey, Karl Lorch, Dave Olerich, Bob Richards, Peder Solverson and Harold Stringert—went to court in order to fight the NFL's ban on signing WFL players.

On October 31st, U.S. District Court Judge Edward J. Devitt ruled on behalf of the players that the NFL and its 26 teams "are hereby restrained and enjoined from taking any action prohibiting, discouraging or otherwise preventing" the nine former Hawaiians "from negotiating and contacting with defendant member National Football League clubs."

On November 5th, Judge Devitt issued a preliminary injunction allowing all former WFL players who were not under contract to sign with the NFL. Devitt said his ruling would stand until a hearing on the merits of the injunction order would be held November 26th. The NFL had given its teams only a couple days to sign players after the WFL folded before Pete Rozelle halted the practice, and he ruled that NFL teams couldn't sign any WFL players the rest of the season. Devitt called Rozelle's ruling a "concerted boycott against former WFL players and a deprivation of the plaintiff's rights of freedom to sign contracts." He added that the WFL players would "suffer irreparable harm" and "the court's capacity to do justice would be hindered" if they were not allowed extra time to negotiate and sign contracts with NFL teams. The Judge expanded his previous order, which he handed down on the 31st, to a class action suit to include all WFL players not under contractual obligations.

Rozelle testified that his ruling of the month before was "reasonable" because it was comparable to trade deadlines in other sports.

"The League doesn't want major changes late in the season so one team could buy a championship," Rozelle argued, "It could affect a championship race which had originally been established within the league rules.

"We're anxious to have players from the WFL come into the NFL," Rozelle testified. "We just want to know that they're legally free to come in and they're not going to cause us problems."

Edward Glennon, an attorney for the original nine plaintiffs, responded by saying, "NFL teams can acquire players on waivers up to the last week of the season. . . . All we want is the right for our players to negotiate with NFL teams."

Later that day, Rozelle suddenly switched gears and advised his member teams that they could resume signing WFL players.

"Professional sports and the public are better served by open and unfettered competition," said Devitt.

Roller wound up playing six games with the Packers in 1975. Others who inked deals for the remainder of the '75 season included linebackers Rodrigo Barnes, Warren Capone, and Steve Colavito, tight ends Chuck Bradley, Willie Frazier, Len Garrett, and Ted Kwalick, defensive ends Don Ratliff, Louis Ross, and Larry Estes, defensive backs Dick Conn, and Jerry Davis, running back Johnny Musso, and offensive guard Ralph Perretta.

The players were allowed to continue their careers. But the Wiffle was dead and gone.

"I think they missed a great opportunity to come up with a competitive league," Portland Storm GM Ron Mix recently told wflnation.com; "There just wasn't the financial backing. The league never should have gotten off the ground with the type of financial backing that generally existed with the league. There should have been certain safeguards that should have included that each owner was required to drop a bond, whatever amount of dollars they anticipated to operate a team for a year. There were just no safeguards at all. It was a huge missed opportunity because America was ripe for more teams in more cities and the players were not being paid adequately in the NFL and were ripe for being, to use a farm analogy, harvested to move over to another league.

"My impression of it is that league absolutely had a chance to become successful, if ever a league did," Mix continued. "At the time when that league was formed, great football players in the National Football League at the top of their peak were making $60,000 a year.

"What ruined the league was that individual owners went crazy and started signing players at outrageous amounts. They spent the league into absolute bankruptcy when the country was ripe for another thing."

Mix was reluctant to talk about his WFL days and thought some World Football League coaches and executives carried a "WFL stigma" on their back and weren't offered NFL positions once the league folded.

"At that time there was room for a new league," said Babe Parilli, "The players that came in there were as good as the NFL, and they thought it was going to be another NFL. I honestly believe that there was room for two leagues then. The players, when they were paid, made some good money. We paid John Elliott and Gerry Philbin about $60,000, which was more than they had made with the Jets. Tom Sherman and Brian Dowling were signed for about $35,000, but that's nothing compared to today. We needed stronger ownership. If the WFL had played a shorter schedule, with fewer teams, we would've fared better. A schedule from May through September would have worked."

Everyone it seemed had a solution to the WFL's ills. Shorter schedule. Fewer teams. Playing in non-NFL cities to avoid competition. Better facilities. Better TV contract. So the reactions of some were not surprising.

"I had anticipated the league folding," said Memphis wide receiver Ed Marshall, "It was not a great shock."

John Bosacco, owner of the Philadelphia Bell, perhaps best summed up the life and death of the league by stating: "It was on the operating table for two years. This was merely a form of euthanasia."

"I don't think any league should try to take on the NFL," recalled Babe Parilli, "Especially if they are trying to get ratings or a television contract. The WFL should have played a schedule that began in May or June. That way they would avoid the NFL games. You got to have television. Without television you have nothing, you're minor league. One of the things that contributed to the demise of the league was the stadiums. Most of the stadiums weren't very good."

Of course, this being the WFL, even the demise of the league couldn't pass without something weird happening.

"On October 22nd, the day we announced the closing of the World Football League, that night our offices, which were in the Time-Life Building in New York City, were raided," said Commissioner Chris Hemmeter, "All the film footage, tickets, everything that had some value, was gone. I have a few things: footballs, *Sports Illustrated* articles, and such. All the items we had that had any value at all were taken that night."

Even in death the WFL got ripped off.

Repercussions from the news of the league's collapse came swiftly. The public-relations man for the San Antonio Wings, Don Dailey, drove a station wagon—one of six loaned to the team by future New Orleans Saints' owner Tom "Boogie" Benson, who was at the time a local Chevrolet dealer—to a surprise meeting of the team's stockholders, where the death of the WFL was announced. Stunned, Dailey returned to the Wings' office, collected his personal effects and in 10 minutes was ready to load them into his car. Suddenly a man drove up, blocked Dailey's vehicle and declared, "Don't waste your time loading that stuff into that car, buddy. We got orders from Tom Benson to pick it up—right now."

In the plush offices of the Southern California Sun, the phones instantly went dead. "They were ringing off the wall, then silence," said a secretary. "Dead silence. We couldn't figure it out. Then someone tried to call out. No dial tone." The phone company had already disconnected the service.

As he slowly packed up the team's assorted paraphernalia into cardboard boxes, Sun business manager Bob Negrey offhandedly asked, "What do you suppose all our trophies will bring in a pawn shop?"

"Dan Rogers came back and worked for the league," said Tim Grandi, "and during those final days he was talking on the phone at his desk. The desk and chair were rental furniture, and the league had fallen behind on its payments. Sure enough, the rental company comes by and takes away the desk and chair. But Dan kept right on talking on the phone."

It seemed like some people had begun to forget the WFL already. But not everyone had forgotten. A fan of the Steamer wrote this poignant letter to the editor of the *Shreveport Times*: "Shreveport was just another city with bars, pool halls, bowling alleys and theaters drifting in the sieve. Then Shreveport was alive, a city that was breathing, pulsating, cheering, booing. 'Go! Go! Get 'em!' I can't believe the time has run out so quickly and the ball game is over. Death is a blessing for some, and heartache for some. When it strikes the young that have fought so bravely and gallantly, it is a heartache. Goodbye Edd, Big Jim, Captain Taylor. God bless you and thanks for the memories."

"The WFL was a great opportunity for me," said Hugh Wyatt, "and some of the players I was fortunate enough to meet were really just great guys. The original WFL players, the guys who suffered through training camp and were there for opening day would have done anything to have the league be a success. They would have played for free, and many of them did. It was a great experience and a special time in my life."

Offensive lineman Glenn "Lumpy" Hyde was in his second week with the Charlotte Hornets when the league folded. He was earning $400 a week and when the announcement was made that the league was finished, Hyde rushed to the bank to cash his final payroll check.

"To my amazement, it didn't bounce," Hyde said with a smile.

Hyde was still owed $11,000 when the Chicago Fire folded in 1974, but he put it philosophically, saying it was just one of life's "learning experiences." Hyde also figured that if it hadn't been for the WFL, he never would have had a pro football life.

"A lot of guys didn't get paid but the WFL gave the guys a chance to play some football, get some experience and a chance to be known," Hyde said, "There were a lot of guys in the WFL who might have been over the hill by one or two years, but let me tell you they were some of the most crafty players I've ever seen. Some of those old defensive linemen taught me a lesson or two."

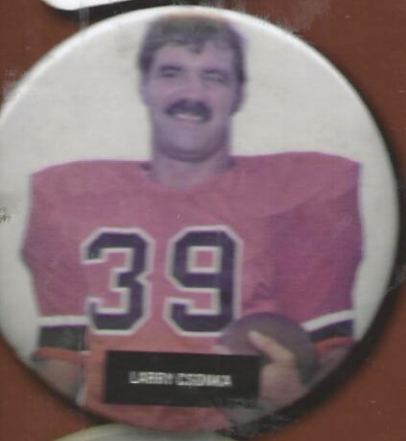
They must have because Hyde went on to play in the NFL and the USFL. The WFL had given him the opportunity to continue his career.

"It was a good league," Babe Parilli recalled, "and we had some great players. Many fine memories."

Memories. The WFL has plenty of them. Enough to fill a whole book.

The decade of the 1970s was a unique, fascinating, depressing and exciting decade all at the same time. It was a turbulent time that saw many history-making events, and some wild and crazy fads and fashions come and go. A lot of things associated with the 1970s, like bell bottoms, leisure suits, Jimmy Hoffa, pet rocks, lava lamps, mood rings, Nehru jackets, disco music, and Richard Nixon, didn't survive that turbulent decade. Neither did the World Football League. Like the decade itself, the WFL was at once unique, fascinating, depressing and exciting. It was a slick, mod, hip alternative to an established entity, the National Football League. It featured the Dickerrod, King Corcoran, bouncing checks, yellow footballs, court orders, magenta and orange uniforms, color-coded pants, Papergate, and singular team nicknames that one scribe said made the WFL sound more like a listing of Indian folklore than a football league. But, also like the decade itself, while the league did not survive the 70s, the wild, zany and hilariously true stories associated with the WFL survive to this day. It has never ceased to amaze and entertain. As Alex Hawkins, color commentator for the WFL's Game of the Week broadcasts, so aptly said, "The whole thing was so bizarre, that you just had to love it."

All of these stories have been chronicled in "WIFFLE," a book that can be best described as a 50-yard line ticket to a real-life Theater of the Absurd.



MARK SPECK has been researching pro football for the last 26 years. He has written numerous articles for the Professional Football Researchers' Association publication, *The Coffin Corner*, and has contributed his time and efforts to several football encyclopedias and the official WFL website, www.worldfootballleague.org/. He has also worked as co-author of *The World Football League Encyclopedia* with Tod Maher, and has authored a book on the 1974 Florida Blazers called *. . . and a Dollar Short*, for which he won the PFRA's 2011 Nelson Ross Award for "outstanding achievement in pro football research and historiography." When he is not researching pro football, Mark works full-time as a Quality Assurance Specialist for the non-profit organization Able2 in Elmira, New York. Mark lives in Horseheads, New York, with his still very understanding and patient wife Elise, and their Pug.

ISBN 978-1-937943-24-0